

THE MAIL BOAT

THE MAIL BOAT

by

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FOR GERTRUDE EISENSTADT

*Any resemblance to persons living or dead
is purely coincidental.*

PART ONE

LETTER NO. I

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

June 10th

Dear Mamma,

I hope that you won't be upset . . . I left Rome this morning and am now on the boat on my way to the island, the one I told you about. The ride is about five hours. Mamma, please don't be angry with me. It is true that I promised that I would be home by the end of the month, I know that, but then there came this chance and I didn't want to miss it. For who knows if I shall ever have such a chance again, to go to a real island all by myself, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

The sea is calm and marvellously blue. Ten minutes ago I was up on deck and already I could see the island, more than two hours away. A long, mountainous outline, actually much larger than I had expected. It looked like just a dot on the map. The boat is small and old but very pleasant.

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Everything is old-fashioned and neat, the machinery on deck, the chains, the railing, all freshly painted. There is a tall orange smoke-stack. And I have the tiny first-class section all to myself. The walls of the lounge are panelled in dark wood, the chairs and corner divans are upholstered in faded velvet. Brocaded curtains.

But I am much too excited to write now. I want to go up again and see if there is anything interesting going on. I'm tremendously happy and my only worry, really, is that you will reprove me. Tell me that this is another *foolish jaunt* and why don't I come home. And then you always sound as though you thought that I'd never come back. But Mamma; *please* understand. Of course I'm coming home. Soon. Maybe next month. But don't, you see, it serves no purpose to be angry with me, so please be patient, just a little longer. I'm enjoying myself, I'm getting everything I can out of my stay in Europe, and, after all, isn't that what you wanted?

June 11th

Mamma I've already so many things to tell you. I don't know where to begin. The island is marvellous. It's like a picture book. So clean and

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tidy, everything is painted white, even the streets are whitewashed—can you imagine! (You who believe that Italians are dirty.)

I have a room in a fisherman's house, it's right off the waterfront. The room is square, painted light blue and white, with a large iron bed and over me I have a vaulted ceiling. There are no flat ceilings on the island, there being no wood for beams. (There are no trees, no flowers, no green anywhere.) Instead each house is topped with a series of little domes, one to each room; it's like a multitude of little round hats. My room is not large, though it occupies the entire upper floor. I reach it through an outside stairway, over an arch. Below me live the Camillo Fontanas, with their little daughter, Viola, who looks exactly like Betsy's Mimi. She's already come several times to my room '*per fare compagnia*', she's such a sweetheart. I have my meals downstairs with the family. They are very poor but also very very kind. They talk slowly and seriously and I think they like me. They call me '*La Signorina*'.

And the air is so pure and light, it's as though I had never breathed before in my life. This morning I took a long walk to the Pennolo, the island's highest peak. There is a weather station on top, which was apparently the object of our walk—so my guide had decided. My guide is Mario, a very

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serious person, thirteen years old (thirteen and seven months, he told me) he makes me laugh, he is so serious. This morning he appeared unexpectedly at my door, my landlords must have sent him up. His first words to me were: You came last night with the boat. And then, still without smiling: You want to visit the island. It's been like that all day. Maybe he is shy, for many shy people are gruff. And he is also very pretty. Much to his disappointment, however, we were not allowed into the station. A bearded man wearing a sailor cap told us that we would have to ask for permission at the port. So we had to content ourselves with the view. But what a view! It was like standing on the hump of an enormous beast. The island is thin and long, a string of rounded hills, very much like a backbone, really, a contorted backbone. There are innumerable bays and inlets and hidden beaches. At some places the slope is interrupted by fearful cliffs. And all around us was the very flat sea. We watched a big liner pass by, not far from the island. It looked like a toy. And far away we could see the Italian mainland. Mario tells me that sometimes you can see it quite clearly, even the houses, he says, which I don't believe.

I could have stayed up there forever, but Mario was impatient. I don't think he enjoys me too

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much. Still he 'decided' that tomorrow we would visit the other village. There is another village at the other end of the island: U-Punte, if I understood correctly, anyway that's how it sounds. Mamma, it's getting late, and I want to close. The boat is going to leave very soon and there won't be another for three days after that, if the sea permits, otherwise longer. My address is just my name and the word '*Fermoposta*'.

Looking out the window now I can see Mario with his gang on the waterfront. He stands a little apart from the others and I think that he's watching my window. He is really a remarkably beautiful child. My chaperon.

Mamma, please don't worry about me for there is nothing to worry about me here. I'm perfectly safe and well and nothing is going to *happen* to me. Many many kisses,

Martha

p.s. I almost forgot—it's about Thomas. He hasn't written to me in a very long time, but I heard he was ill. He has kidney stones. Why don't you give him a call. And tell Jenny that I'll write to her very soon. Maybe tomorrow.

LETTER NO. 2

*. From Miss Martha Baker
to Miss Janet Picard in New York*

FOUR DAYS LATER

June 14th

Dear Jenny,

By now you must know that I'm on the island. I am sure my mother called you up and told you that I had 'pulled off another trick'. Poor mother. Well anyway, here is the news: Oscar is with me. He arrived tonight and now he is right here in this room, asleep.

I am watching him. He is breathing slowly, his mouth slightly open. It is so quiet. The whole town must be asleep. There are two candles on my table and the flames are perfectly straight. A moment ago he moved his head. Now it is resting on one of his soft round shoulders. The sheet is pulled halfway down his chest. He sleeps naked, you know. Does this embarrass you? I hope it doesn't. Though I am blushing myself just now. And suddenly I wonder whether I should really

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send this letter. Or whether I shouldn't, at least, blot out that he is naked . . . Why? He looks so defenceless now, so vulnerable. It brings tears to my eyes.

To tell you the truth, Jenny, I was terribly afraid that he wouldn't come, and just to think of it, even now, my heart almost fails. For it was his idea, you know, that I should go four days ahead, to get the feel of the place, he said—as though it were the most natural thing in the world that we should come here separately. He said that he didn't want to *influence* my impressions. And that's very typical of him, really. But still, I wondered. At times I had an awful suspicion—and then I was so afraid that I didn't even go to the boat. I watched it come in from a curve on the road that rises from the pier. It landed slowly, slowly. Meanwhile the whole town had gathered on the pier. The arrival of the boat is always a big event. Then I saw people getting off the gang-plank, but who they were I couldn't see. What agony that was. With me was Viola, my landlord's little daughter. I asked her if she knew Oscar. Yes, she knew him, she said—pronouncing it OS-car. Everybody knows him on the island, it seems.

And then, there he was! carrying his typewriter and looking on benevolently while a group

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of boys disputed the honour of carrying his other bags. He spotted me from afar, I could see, but he didn't hurry his pace, he only smiled. And I waited. And when he came close he touched my cheek with his hand and said, "How are you, child?" No, I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't come. But now that he is here, it all seems so natural, as though we had never been separated at all.

Would you like him, Jenny? many times I have wondered if you would. Maybe you imagine him tall and strong, a he-man; but he isn't that at all. You would say that he is almost slight. But he has a strong charm, or power—I don't know what it is. People are drawn to him, too much, even, and I don't always like it. It's in his voice, it's in the way he moves, in the peculiar tilt of his head. He always seems to listen. Even as he talks, he listens, and as he listens, he smiles . . . Everything in his presence becomes light and easy—I was thinking of just that while I watched him come up the road, carrying his typewriter. There was something about the way he carried it, about the way he walked, you would have sworn that the case was empty.

Anyway—you must think I'm crazy. And now I'm going to bed. Poor Oscar, he was so tired. He stayed up all last night on a deadline job. To-

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morrow we are starting on a house-hunt, for he wants a place far away from town. You know, he intends to finish his novel here, and he is so sweet, he says that I am going to 'help' him. But what worries *me* is the cooking. He laughs when I say that I don't know how to cook. "You'll learn, it's only a question of attitude." "But you won't like it," I tell him. "Of course I'll like it." And he laughs. What do you think of such a person?

Well, good night Jenny. And write to me soon.

· *Martha*

LETTER NO. 3

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MacCloy in Paris*

ONE DAY LATER

June 15th

My dear André,

What shall I tell you? What *significant* detail? (An elusive term, in any case, *significant*; but much favoured lately by the reviewers—have you noticed? It is hardly an improvement over its predecessor *important*; it is less significant, in point of fact. For the critics leave the question unanswered: *significant of what?*) and already I sound pretentious and vain and ‘superior’, and I have a decided impulse to crumple this page in my fist . . . It does not seem possible that I should be unable to write a single sentence that did not sound contrived and false, or ‘forced’—simply because I *know* that you keep my letters. (Then I should not write to you, etc., and the joke would be, of course, if you did not keep them . . .)

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There was a cow aboard our ship. I first noticed it on the pier, at the end of our loading alignment, while our ship, a small white steamer, lay at anchor about two hundred yards away, swaying softly on the gentle blue waves. We were waiting to be ferried across. And I wondered greatly about the cow already—for instance, about how they would load it into the rowboat. For the time being it stood very still, its legs slightly spread and stiffly braced against the wind. Some old sacking had been tied over its eyes.

This is what happened. They pushed and kicked the reluctant cow to the edge of the pier until it lost its footing and splashed into the water. Next they towed it to the side of the ship, only the nose and horns sticking out, and also the sack which had slipped to the side a little, so that one eye looked up like a swollen egg. Then it was hoisted by the horns with a crane. Slowly and silently a vertical cow emerged from the sea, like a prehistoric monster, its legs folded helplessly on its chest. When, after long and even pulling, the boom was high enough to clear the railing, it was swung and brusquely lowered on the deck—where the cow collapsed. There was a short silence, and then, suddenly, everyone started to laugh. A seaman kicked the cow brutally in the groin. It twitched and rose jerkily to its feet. “No

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matter, she killer tonight," said an officer who stood next to me, in unexpected American. He looked at me strangely, perhaps because I looked strange myself; then he too started to laugh and to shake his head; it was apparently a roaring joke. At last he added, "No f . . . good."

Why do I tell you this? I don't know. It has no point, no meaning—none, at least, that I can see. But I decided, at the time, that I would tell it to you, and since then it has worked in my mind. Nor should you think that I blame these people, for they were quite innocent (except the officer, perhaps). And yet I wonder. It would have been interesting to measure their 'emotional curve' while the animal was being raised. For a cow swinging high, among masts and riggings, against a very blue sky, much like a kitten suspended by the skin of its neck, is a most unusual sight; and what moved them must have been very close to passion—which is how I explain the sailor's kick. I was certainly not unmoved myself. (Later I was terribly seasick.)

Your letter was waiting for me on the island; a delightful surprise—though its contents was partly unjust (do I *really* need such a warning? . . .). Anyway, let me reassure you at once: this is *not* a romantic place; not in the modern and glamorous sense of the word. It is the

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opposite; an oppressive and sullen rock, utterly barren, hard, poor, so poor, indeed, that it is clean . . . And I would even say that it is not Italian, it could be somewhere North; it is not Italian because nobody laughs, except the children, and their laughter is chill. (I shall tell you more about the children later, particularly one; they are a chapter apart.) If you ask a man how he is, more likely than not he will answer '*si muore*', 'one dies'—a common expression; it corresponds more or less to 'I'm getting along'.

Then what am I doing here? Why did I come to this Gothic place—if I don't like it? Because I am lazy. In a moment of weakness I told a certain person, M. (she claims to have met you in Paris) that I knew this island . . . after which I was caught. It would have been too difficult, too bothersome, to refuse. Besides, this is an excellent place for work; it is very quiet and I needed to get away from the crowd. M. is an excellent secretary, apart from the fact that she is a very good sport. She is lively; it is a delight to watch her. She has an immense capacity for enjoyment, very open and simple; and efficient. In a month or so I should be able to finish the novel.

And then, who knows? I may have really wanted to come. There was a strange compulsion. There is something here that brought me back.

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What it is I do not know, but I sensed it again as soon as I landed—*something*.

It may just be the rhythm of the place; the rhythm of the mail boat, which comes twice a week, and which has thereby created a curious unit of time, '*the boat*' (one says 'last boat' or 'two boats from now', etc., meaning, of course, the span between arrivals), and it is certainly a fact that everyone on the island waits for the boat. But why? There is very little mail . . . though, on the other hand, it is true that what there is of it is interesting: it comes from America. America, America, there is no more vivid concept here, and it is really surprising how many of the islanders have been to America, particularly among the older people. There are constant reminders. We passed an old ragged woman this morning, she was carrying a bundle of sticks on her head; she watched us pass: "You boys from je-shtates?" she crackled; it was a most jarring experience. Even the word 'America' is pronounced with a particular reverence, a particular smile—like Paradise. To receive a letter from America is like receiving a message from God. The social scale: (1) those who have been to America, and among these (a) those who have come back rich and (b) those who have not; (2) those who may go there still; and (3) those, at last, who may not, the

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hopeless and damned, who have not even one relative there, or friend, who might, in some unknown future, call them.

I heard a lot about America from one of the islanders on the boat. He was taking back the body of his brother. For I failed to mention that there was another unusual object on board our ship: a coffin. It was tightly packed in a burlap bag on top of which fluttered a tiny bunch of wet flowers. A case of very bad luck, the brother told me. The man had been ill for many years and at last he had been taken to the mainland to be amputated of one of his legs. But he died during the operation; and now to bring him back was very expensive. The body will have to pay a special duty to land. . . . I should have wanted very much to learn more about this, but unfortunately the man preferred to talk about America—of that he never tired. "I been all over," he told me, "New York, Brooklyn, West Virginia, San Francisco, California, I been all over. Yea. Lots o' money, lots o' jobs, lots o' eat." What is so mysterious about many of these people is not that they go to America but that they come back. My companion, for instance; he married when he was twenty-one and the following year he went to America, leaving his wife behind with child. He was away for twenty years. "Built the

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Empire State," he said, "was a boss." (Not one of them who was not at least a boss.) Meanwhile he sent back small sums of money. Eventually his wife was able to buy a strip of land and build a house and, later still, a splendid tomb. But of course, by the time he came back, the wife was old . . . I understand that the brother will be the second boarder of the beautiful tomb. The first was the child who died while the man was away.

I am taking M. to the cemetery tomorrow morning. It is an enlightening sight, high on a cliff, a charming, walled-in toy town with diminutive streets and squares and rows of gaily painted pavilions, bisquit-houses, miniature temples with tiny, chalk-white columns . . . I spent many hours there last year.

Which is all for now, my good André. Write to me soon, for I am rather depressed.

OSCAR

LETTER NO. 4

*From Miss Martha Baker.
to Miss Janet Picard in New York*

NINE DAYS LATER .

June 24th

Dear Jenny,

We found a fabulous house, about one-third up the highest hill on the island, on the edge of a cliff—and we got it for almost nothing! They say that it was once a look-out, in the days of the pirates. The walls are very thick. It really looks like two cubes, one on top of the other. We have the whole house to ourselves, but occupy only the upper floor. Two rooms. The one I'm sitting in now, and a smaller one for Oscar to work in. Each has a door leading on a huge common terrace, from which we can see the sea on both sides. About twenty yards from the terrace is a stairway winding down to our 'private' beach. On the other side, far away, is the port. A half-hour ago I saw the boat come in.

What fun it was to fix up the place! Now we

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are almost set. Oscar recruited a gang of children to help us, our 'slaves', as he calls them. He knows just how to handle them, how to praise them. They'd do anything for him, I think. But still, I'll be happy when they will all be gone. They are enthusiastic workers but they make too much noise. And also, I have a tremendous desire to be alone with Oscar. It's going to be wonderful. I can hardly wait.

Oscar plans to do a lot of work. He hasn't started yet, for he wants first to get settled. But the conditions are ideal—I almost wish I were a writer myself. Even I could write a novel here, it is so quiet. The air is so light. Did I tell you that here they even whitewash the floors? It gives you the oddest feeling. It's like being mid-air. The furniture floats . . . And to keep the floors clean is simple: once a week you dip a brush in a pail and give the whole place a new coat. From where I sit I look out the door of the bedroom. All I see is the white of the terrace and the blue of the sky.

Last night we slept for the first time in the new house. I was a little afraid. Oscar laughed, but I know that he was not too calm himself. It is always strange in a new house at night. But here . . . all alone, far from any other human being, with the noise of the sea and just the candlelight flickering on the vaulted ceiling. . . . I think I

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would have *died* if I had been here alone. It was funny, you know, when we tried to get this place, nobody believed us. They thought we were crazy.

Today they whitewashed the other room. Now they are down at the beach, cleaning up and also taking a swim, I guess. I can hear their yells now as I write. Oscar didn't want me to go along. He didn't say so, but I sensed it. Maybe he didn't want me to see the kids naked—in some ways he is very puritanical, you know. It is strange. But I don't care. And I think of what it will be to swim with him alone, in the early morning . . . and then to lie on the sand for hours! Oh Jenny! Did I deserve all this? Sometimes I'm terribly scared. It's all too good to be true.

Now I'm going to run down to the boat. Maybe there's a letter. And I also must buy a few things for tonight and for tomorrow noon. Incidentally, I'm doing fine on the cooking: the most *marvelous* pasta sciutta!

Loads of love. And if you see my mother tell her that I'll write very soon.

Martha

LETTER NO. 5

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MacCloy in Paris*

SIX DAYS LATER

June 30th

My dear André,

There is a very beautiful French expression: 'to laugh yellow.' I laughed that way a good deal while I read your letter. But are you quite sure, André, that I am *being romantic* (you took great pains to underline those words), have you really questioned yourself whether I was or not—be it in the 'modern' or in the 'ancient' sense—or was it not rather a 'sudden intuition', a form of reasoning to which you are easily given? . . .

I am defending myself . . . of course, because I don't like to be called romantic: it pricks my pride. But also because the term is unjust. Of course it is true that I *adjust* reality to a personal pattern. That I concede—why not? How else are my stories borne? But it does not mean that I adjust what I *see* to what I *expect*: there is a fine

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difference there. I am not the man of your example who 'hears the gondoliers sing'; I am not, to quote again, 'the gullible swindler who cheats, but cheats mostly himself, in that he surrenders objective perception.' That is not true. And as for the part that is true, if you feel that it must have a term, then why not another: 'creative adjustment', for instance, or 'poetic correction'—how about that?

At any rate, romantic or not, the island is casting its charms; that creepy sense of being cut off, of being hopelessly stranded and most of all, depending, like everyone else, on the erratic whims of the boat: "How is the sea? Is it calming down? Do you think it will come?" and the man you ask these questions, instead of saying yes or no, looks up in the sky, and then, very calmly, he says, "*libeccio*" or "*tramontana*"—these are names of winds; you are supposed to draw your own conclusions from that. And then, in the end, when the boat does come in—so pretentious and foolish in all its little ways, like an important and capricious widow—it is always a disappointment. The life it brings with it is meagre, and the mail, if any, is little. . . . And yet there is a marvellous moment: when you hear the first blast of the whistles. When the long wait is over, at last, when, in just another moment, it will appear

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behind the cliff. Like the bedridden patient who hears the doorbell ring: it does not matter, not then, that it is only the nurse—the morning injection, of course—it is still a visit, it comes from the world outside, that wonderful world of streets and noise and people. . . . It is the knowledge, that instant, that one is not forgotten. . . . And then again the whistle blasts, a tearing, unbearable flash of pain, of joy, of life, of hope: The boat has come! The boat has come! And the coldest heart is stirred that instant.

The island affects me in many ways. In the first place, I am unable to work on my novel. I am too distracted, I am tense and full of yearning; there is a strange alertness in me: *I am under a spell*, contrived, perhaps (you will say so, of course) which is beside the point; for I am surely caught. . . . Consciously or not, I have worked myself up; and now I must release the pressure. The method I have chosen for this is a story, maybe a *long* short story, forty to fifty pages long, based on an incident that occurred the very night I arrived on the island.

There had been an attempt to make a party out of my arrival: M. is very sweet that way and it was very much like her to want to celebrate . . . She had ordered lobster. But unfortunately it was just one of those things that do not come off. I

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was tired and I had been very sick on the trip. Moreover the lobster was served boiling hot. (Hot lobster is most *extraordinarily* nasty.)

The feast was held downstairs, in our landlord's quarters; a fairly large room. For the occasion the bed had been pushed to one side; and a table, much too large, had been set up for two under the central lamp. We were to dine alone. Except that the family watched from the kitchen: all the relatives had been summoned for the show, I guess, and all of them pushed and fought to get a good peep. M. knew nothing of this; her back was turned to the crowd. And particularly she did not know of a lurid creature who sat at the entrance of the kitchen, or rather in the opening between the two rooms, so that the boy who served us had to stride his legs each time he passed from one place to the other. A strange apparition, with an eaten-out face, a crippled back, and spotted red hands that emerged, indecently raw, to clutch his slightly trembling knees . . . But most ghastly of all were his eyes, large and glassy, that fixed a point about a foot and a half to the right of my head. I turned several times to make sure that the wall, at that point, was entirely bare; and then I tried not to mind. But I was uneasy, to say the least. Finally, after a half-hour or so, the creature rose; hesitated a moment, said, "*Me ne vado a*

spasso" (dropping each word like a stone), and then started across the room, securely, but making no allowance for our table; fortunately the boy intercepted him halfway across, led him around us, and then out of the door. At which point I was practically frozen. M. was not half so affected however. "He must be blind," she said; a deduction which was quickly confirmed by our landlady. She came pouncing out of the kitchen, pointing one finger, alternately, from one eye to the other: "He's blind!" she yelled in our ears. "Blind! he doesn't see!" And I remember distinctly that at that very instant I raised my eyes and encountered the glance of the boy. (The unusual child I had meant to mention in my previous letter.) The boy was smiling. A slow, coquettish smile, uncovering slowly his teeth: inexpressibly knowing and shy. And then I was filled with horror. I don't know why.

Which is not much of a story, you say. And, of course, it isn't. The story came later, during long and sleepless nights. Cats fought outside our window, on the waterfront, and for hours I listened to their complicated wails: so passionate and yet so controlled, so restrained and so fierce, and lonely too. Slowly, slowly, I formed an image. Or maybe it came suddenly, and I only nursed it slowly. I don't know. But it was soon an obses-

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sion. One night I could bear it no longer ; noticing that M. was awake I told it to her, "The blind man is killing the cats," I said. The effect was terrific. She sat up straight and stark ; one instant, two ; then she suddenly broke, she fell in my arms : "But that's terrible!" she sobbed, "you mustn't say such things!" and then I knew that I had a story.

The shape it eventually took was this: *Three* Americans arrive on the island. But the island, which at first seemed so bright ('A Heavenly Place', the title of the story), turns gradually into a place of horror ; like a landscape that turns grey under a passing cloud ; and the horror increases till one of the three succumbs, dies literally of fright. Two of the three are innocent : they are Mr. and Mrs. Hicky, from Winnetka, Illinois, in Europe, as Mr. Hicky puts it, on a pleasure jaunt, what the Hell !

Mr. Hicky is the type that is often called the 'life of a party', just as his voice is of the kind that is often called 'booming' (it fits very aptly his considerable frame) and he is booming altogether, in fact, with energy, with life, a genial and engaging type—his clothes are comfortably ample—he has a way about him, a noisy and good-natured way of clowning, of gesturing to strangers, of asking directions and of distribut-

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ing tips: *Molto hello! molto hello!*"—anyway, I'm sure you know the type I mean; he is common enough.

His wife, on the other hand, though equally innocent, is of a very different sort. She is very quiet, very kind, but slightly prude. Before marrying she was a social worker. Here is something I jotted down about her last night: 'Many of Mrs. Hicky's observations ended as a question, as though she needed a constant approval and sanction—or perhaps only the approval of Mr. Hicky, to whose every word she nodded and smiled, but not securely, almost protectively in fact, apologising maybe for the danger he was in, always, of being made a fool. She was a small, wrinkled person, accustomed to live in the shade—in it she had faded to a gentle grey and grey was the colour of her clothes; so that it was with a start that one discovered, suddenly, a golden tooth in her smile.'

The third member, a student, Mr. Jonathan A. Peebles, I see but dimly yet. I know only that he is very soft-spoken. So very soft-spoken, in fact, that often one can barely hear what he says, which may be, at that, the secret of his peculiar charm; at any rate, it instantly conquered the Hickys. He told them that he had come to Europe to pursue his Homerial studies, which, in their present

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phase, concerned 'The Handling of Homeric Themes by the Major Latin Authors. Part one: Prose'—and it was this revelation, indeed, that had led directly to their inviting him on this trip to the island—where, most authorities agreed, and Peebles supported the idea strongly, Ulysses had stopped on his wonderful voyage. But it is doubtful that they would have invited him so readily had they known . . . that there was also another motive for Mr. Peebles' stay in Europe: the advice of his analyst. "It would be dangerous for you to stay any longer," he had said, "the change will do you good." In particular Mr. Hicky, had he known it, would have hesitated to slap him on the back, as he frequently did, and perhaps he would have refrained from calling him Joe. For it is Peebles' satanic and gratuitous pleasure (gratuitous but also compulsive, he can do nothing about it, it is his special affliction), to mock, to sham and ridicule, to embarrass subtly 'where it hurts'—to tantalise sometimes too, but then only to bring in doubt, to set the scene for scandal . . . a sinister little figure, a sort of goblin or gnome and, indeed, he believes himself that he can see the Devil . . .

What happens on the island is fairly simple. Peebles is intent on teasing the Hickys, whom he has recognised as ideal victims. He delights in

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stunting their pleasures, in shaking their mild illusions. The island they admire so much is full, he tells them, of hidden evil. There is a terrible secret, perhaps a sin, an unspeakable sin . . . And he is forever interpreting 'signs'. "Have you noticed," he says to them, "the resemblance, not overt maybe, but real enough, if you take the trouble to notice, of the blind man's face to many of the faces we see? . . . and particularly, grotesque as it may seem, to that of the young boy who serves us, and whose exquisite beauty you pointed out, Mr. Hicky . . . it is strange, is it not? that you should have pointed it out . . ." And so on. Except that suddenly Peebles is caught himself. At first he does not believe it, but slowly terror creeps in. One night, unable to sleep, he runs out on the waterfront—and there, on the lonely, shiny platform, the climactic scene: just as he had imagined, he sees the blind man at work, killing cats. He is paralysed, unable to move, unable to breathe. And the blind man is coming closer, always closer, waving his wounded hands . . . and suddenly, just as the man is about to touch him, just as the fingers, like insects' antennæ are about to, reach for his neck, he recognises the horrid face. *The blind man is himself!*

Tell me, André, what do you think of all this?

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Do you like the idea? I am most anxious to know. This morning I wrote a passage which ought to give you the general feeling, what R.H. would call the 'tonal key'. Did you read his piece in *Pen and Penny*? I found it rather weak, on the whole. Anyway, here is the passage:

"The pier they stood on had once been very much longer, but entire portions of it had crumpled into the sea, leaving only a string of irregular islands, platforms, which were used as swimming perches by swarms of noisy children. They were beautifully brown and their bodies glistened as they swam and dived and caroused shrilly back and forth, from island to island, and out to the masts of a sunken ship that jutted out of the placid sea. What Peebles wished her to observe, and what, he noticed, she presently did observe, was occurring on the nearest of these islands: a group of five or six young boys, who had been running themselves on the flat stones of the platform, had suddenly started a game, a hasty and almost absurdly indecent game accompanied by joyous and obscene comparisons and yells. She stared at them, half hypnotised, for about a half-minute—until one of the boys, the tallest of the group, stood up, his legs spread wide apart, and with

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loud, mocking laughter, directed his frenzy towards the pier.

. "Then she turned. Desperately she tried to fix her attention on a rowboat that was approaching the landing, her neck so taut in the new direction that it visibly arched. Peebles saw a twitch on the corner of her lips. He whispered in her ear: 'Don't look now, but the natives nearby are behaving very strangely; they are nodding to us, in unison, nodding rapidly, with their heads . . .' Just then Mr. Hicky turned around: 'What's that?' he said. 'Nothing, darling,' she answered, "there's the boat now, coming for us.'"

My good André. Meanwhile we have moved again. We are now housed in the most deserted and desolate spot, over a tiny beach. It is called *La Cala d'Inferno*, a rather appropriate name; surrounded as it is by an arena of ominous cliffs. M. went down there for a swim, a couple of hours ago, alone; which shows a good deal of pluck.

Incidentally, if you see R.H., you may tell him that I read his essay; but please don't tell him that I didn't like it. For it has many good points:

"On fait ce qu'on peut,"

OSCAR

LETTER NO. 6

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Miss Janet Picard in New York*

TWO DAYS LATER

July 2nd

Deary Jenny,

Your letter just came, and also a letter from Thomas. It seems that he is still pretty ill, and rather down, but I hope he'll be happy to hear from me. I'm going to write to him right after this. (Incidentally, don't tell him anything . . .) And of course I should also write to mother.

But Jenny, that is a very blunt question you put me. Why do you ask? What does it matter, and what are you driving at? Anyway, since you *did* ask, the answer is yes, *sure* I'll marry him, any time he wants. Any time he asks. But he won't ask now, you must be reasonable, Jenny, and not force certain things and get all worked up over nothing.

It's unbearably hot and sticky. My arm sticks to the table. I don't feel like writing even, and it

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is also possible that the boat won't leave, for the sea is getting rough on the other side.

Oscar hasn't yet started to work. Just now he is amusing himself, making a chess set. But I guess he will start soon enough, and I don't want to disturb him. He sits in his room for hours, taking notes, thinking—but I still have to type my first page. Oh, I do hope he will be happy here, and able to work! He says that he is 'feeling' a story, that he is looking for a 'shape', and of course I know nothing about these things. But still, what *I* would do, if I were in his place, would just be to sit down and write it. And worry afterward about the 'shape'.

If I only could write! For there is so much to write about and we see so many marvellous things. The characters we meet. Or the terrible scene, the other day, when an emigrant left for Canada. Everything was quiet until the boat started to move. But then what a scene! They all shouted at once. And the man yelling to his crying daughter from the railing. "*Stai zitta. Credi in Dio che papà ha fortuna.*" Be quite, and believe in God that Papa is lucky. I thought my heart would break.

A lizard just looked in the door. There are thousands of lizards around the house, specially today, with the heat. Some fat, some long, and

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then some teenchy-teenchy ones, less than two inches long, but already perfectly formed. The caimans, we call them. They are so sweet, always poised and their little heads raised high, ready to move. And they do move awfully fast when they have to. Sometimes they come right into the house, take a little tour, with several stops, and then out again as soon as somebody moves. I always thought they were vegetarian, but they are not. And today we saw a fat caiman eating a little one, it was horrible. Oscar called me out to see, but by the time I got there the head and the forelegs had already disappeared. Only the hind-quarters and tail stuck out, but they were being rapidly gobbled up. Then there was only the tail. And suddenly it started to wriggle! It was alive, and Oscar thinks even that it was *eating* inside the other one. Oscar was down on his hands and knees to get a better 'ook. He can be awfully cold-hearted when it comes to observing things. Lizards usually eat flies, but strangely enough they disregard ants. Only very rarely, and then just a 'distracted lick'. They have black tongues.

The ants are Oscar's special field. He has done hardly anything else, since we came up here, except observe the ants. For there are terrible battles, right here on our terrace. It's really awful. I had never *imagined* such things. Nor

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had I ever imagined that there were so many different kinds. We discovered that there were two varieties that would actually attack other ants. At first we thought there was only one—very small and vicious red ones. These by themselves gave us some frightful spectacles, particularly after sunset, when they come out in swarms. Oscar stayed out there one night with a candle and a moth burned its wings on it and fell in the pile. In a few seconds it had completely disappeared. Then one day he noticed another tribe of fighters, also very small, but black, with pointed tails. They have long legs and move incredibly fast, in columns. Oscar traced the line all the way back to their hill, almost a hundred yards away. And yesterday he made the great test. He deliberately organised a fight by attracting the black column to the red nest with a piece of cheese. It took him several hours. The scramble was vicious but not as bloody as he had expected. The reds won, but they got very few blacks—too fast for them. However, as Oscar says, they got the cheese.

In the meantime the first tourists have come to the island. I *can't stand* the sight of them. They are desecrating the place with their foolish clothes and talk. And I just *hate* to see the local people kowtow to them, as they do a great deal. The

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idea of earning a penny just changes them completely. Of course I never think of ourselves as being tourists, in spite of our blue jeans, because actually I don't think we are. These people . . . I even resent it when I hear them finding something beautiful, I don't feel they have a right to, they are too foolish. But most of all I am afraid they will interfere with our privacy. For instance, that they should intrude on our beach, with their beach clothes and ball games and God knows what.

Fortunately they are not very many so far. And anyway, if you come to think of it, our privacy never was very great. The kids are no longer in the house, it is true, but they are not far away. They prowl among the rocks, nearby, like little wild animals, very shy—if you look, oops! and their heads disappear. And then, sometimes, they suddenly get a fit and run down to the beach, yelling all the way. Altogether, it's not very tranquil.

But we must be patient. The novelty will soon wear off, I guess. And we still have so much time ahead. Oscar never tires of telling me that. The best is still to come, he says, and I believe so too, with all my heart.

This instant there suddenly was a tremendous thunder, right over the house. And immediately

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it has become much darker. It's going to be our first storm. Now there is wind. It's very exciting, really. A door is slamming.

I kiss, you, too, dear Jenny. It was very sweet of you to end your letter with a kiss.

Martha

LETTER NO. 7

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Prof. Thomas Purdon at Yale*

ONE DAY LATER

July 3rd

My dear dear Thomas,

It has been so many months, and I don't even know exactly *why* we stopped writing. So you have become a professor . . . congratulations! But it's also difficult to pick up again. I tried all last night and wasn't able.

Your letter was sweet but short. I liked it though. And your drawing! But now you *must* get well. You must think of nothing else, really, except to take care of yourself, I mean it. And that's why I'm so afraid I'm going to pain you again. But what can I do, I *must* do what I feel, it's how I am. Darling Thomas, I know you love me, I respect you for it, and it's so good to know that there is such a thing, that you exist. And that's why I don't want to pain you now that you have already so many things on your mind that

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are terrible. But then, maybe I'm foolish to think that you still feel that way about me . . .

Thomas, I'm here with a man, a friend, a lover, call him as you wish. And now that I said it, I feel so relieved that I've started to weep. I'm so nervous. Oh Thomas. I'm so *unhappy*!

I've stopped crying at last. Now I think of how you'd talk to me, "now, baby, that's all right," and it makes me laugh. And also cry again.

Still, I feel better. What is so strange about the whole thing, is that this man is a friend of yours. He told me so. He told me many things about you, when you were little boys together, at school, and so on, and he likes you very much. He is Oscar Tower, the writer. It is such a coincidence. I met him last February, in Rome, and at first I was tremendously proud to know the 'famous person'. He talked about you and that's how we met, I think, though I never told him anything more about us.

Coincidences are so strange in *real* life. I never feel I can trust them. Several times already I have had a terrible dream. I am with a group of people visiting an old ruin or labyrinth, I can't remember, but for no reason, just feeling peevish, I purposely separate myself from the others and

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get lost. At first I enjoy myself. I wander about the huge halls and caves, I look at everything. But gradually I start to get worried. I am all alone and it is silent, the others have disappeared. And then I'm panicked, I hurry, hurry, and I don't get anywhere . . . and I tell myself that there is no certainty that I shall ever find them again! This is *real* life and there is *no guarantee* that things will turn out, the way they do in stories and books . . . do you understand what I mean? I don't think so, because it is mostly a feeling. But I think that it is one of the reasons why people like to read books. Because, as long as it *is* a book, and if it is complete, it is bound to turn out neatly. You don't have to worry, no matter what happens.

You know, up to the time I met Oscar, my trip in Europe had been rather a failure. I didn't see anything. I was in a bad frame of mind. For it is also a question of luck, really, of whether you meet one person or another, of what crowd you get mixed up with, what kind of people. And I had mostly bad luck. In Rome I got in with a group of artists, or 'artistic people', that frequent a certain bar on the Via Babuino. Very foolish people, not artists at all, and only playing at being artists, but I didn't object. You know how easily I am taken in. Though now I *shudder*, just to

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think of how much time I spent in that place. It was so incredibly dull.

And then one day I met Oscar, and everything changed. I met his circle of friends. Not all of them superior people, I guess, but they were always amusing and clever. For the first time in my life I came in contact with so-called 'famous' people (De Sica, Moravia, W. Demby, Orson Wells, etc.) and it all went a bit to my head. But also I never ceased to feel uneasy. What am I doing here? I would ask. It was that way right from the start. Before he got me away from that bar, Oscar came several times to see me there. I knew he hated the place—he had told me so the first time. But then why did he go there? I asked. And he just smiled. If you know him, you know how he smiles. Those gentle Continental manners . . . And then he said, "To see you. I like your voice, I like to hear you talk." As though it were the most natural thing in the world. And that's really what I can't get used to. That it should all be so natural, even now.

Anyway, to make it short, we eventually came to this island where Oscar intends to finish his novel (*Private Matters*, I think it was already announced). The island is wonderful. You would like it very much and there is even a good deal here in your field. Many Roman remains. There

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was once an aqueduct going the whole length of the island. A funny tourist booklet tells of marvellous places and monuments that existed here in Augustus' days, but of which, as it states in each case, there remains not a trace. . . . But there are still some Roman tunnels in use today. They connect various parts of the town, built under the cliffs. It is '*opus reticulatum*'. Do you know what that is? Really, the spot is lovely. We have a very nice house, high up and away from town. For the past two days we have been admiring a storm. Most spectacular. The mail boat could not leave the island and several big freighters came in for refuge.

But Thomas, there is something *terribly wrong* about Oscar. I just can't get rid of the feeling. In the first place, he doesn't need me. He is very gentle, but I don't think he wants me even. He would rather be alone. And it cramps me completely. I am constantly afraid that I am bothering him, how can I be at ease? The other day we went swimming among the rocks and caves, all by ourselves, exploring mysterious places. And it could have been so beautiful, I could have been so happy that day, for I had looked forward to just that experience. But he . . . I love him so, Thomas. When he looks at me and calls me 'Honey-child' I just melt, and when he touches

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me. But Thomas, he doesn't *notice* my love. He is good and kind, but he is that with everyone else. Sometimes I think I should leave him, go away from the island. I might just as well. But I can't, *I can't*. And I cry all day. Oh Thomas, what shall I do?.

But you don't know what I'm talking about, because I don't tell you. There is something else. That is why I am writing to you, because you knew him as a child. Thomas, was there anything *wrong* with him as a boy? I get goose pimples all over my arms and legs.

I try to be calm. I tell myself that I am putting it on. And I try to think back. Actually, now that I remember, he has very few friends. Isn't that strange? Everybody in his circle treated him well, but not *too* well. There were lots of little signs I noticed, I didn't bother about them because he didn't seem to be bothered himself. I really don't know what he thought. Maybe he didn't notice. Only one of the group was really his friend. A movie director, David Orr—I'm sure you've heard of him, though I can't remember just now which famous film he directed. He is now in Norway, or somewhere, doing a film on the Eskimos. One night, we were both waiting for Oscar in a wine shop. He was rather drunk and sentimental, somewhat heavy in his praise, but

still, I could see how fond he was of Oscar. Except that he said something puzzling, and I never got a chance, after that, to ask him what he meant. What he said was, "Yes, there is one fact about Oscar that people don't know: he plays it safe."

But that is not true. Believe me, he plays it like someone who has nothing to lose. He is in constant danger. And now I know that it was very unwise to come and live here all by ourselves, in this deserted spot. What if something happened? But I didn't know before how *strong* the thing was. Thomas, do you know what I'm talking about? Just once I was able to bring up the subject with him. One night. And then I felt so much tenderness and pity—oh, I want to protect him, I don't want something terrible to happen to him. At first he didn't answer. And when he did he was very grave and different. He told me that it started in childhood. But then you *must* know! Help me, please help me. You told me once you would help me no matter what happens.

My sweet and only friend. For I too want to help you. I wish I could make you laugh and be happy just by wishing it, *hard* enough. That you should never suffer again and never have any pain.

For I feel so relieved, now that I've written to

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you, you can't imagine. It's like taking an enema—does that make you laugh? Now I am calm. But you should have seen the state I was in before . . .

Dear Thomas, I embrace you sweetly, with all my tenderness.

Martha

PART TWO

LETTER NO. 8

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

ELEVEN DAYS LATER

July 14th

Dear Mamma,

This is just a line in a hurry, to go with the pictures. So you'll get an idea of how the place looks. I wish you were with me here. Papa would love it. He could do all the hunting he wants—though maybe he wouldn't find the local methods very sporting. They string up nets in places where the birds are likely to pass, and they also go in for traps. The big hunting rush ended in June and the next one will be in September.

I'm having a marvellous time. Just now I am about to step into a boat to take a tour all around the island. It's a perfect day. Mamma, please don't be mad at me for writing so little. And please don't worry.

Your letters are so short and strange. What is it you think is happening to me? By the way you

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sound, I'd almost think there was something the matter with you.

The landscape pictures were taken by a local photographer, who is also a painter. He paints 'Historical Compositions', lots of blues and reds. And he says that he wants to make my portrait!

They are calling me to the boat.

Many kisses from

Martha

LETTER NO. 9

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MacCloy in Paris*

THREE DAYS LATER

July 17th

My dear André,

I have your good letter; it just arrived, and it gives me such extravagant pleasure . . . I am quite overwhelmed and I don't know why, I want to laugh and I do: "tell me about yourself," you say. Very well: I am happy, absurdly, childishly, delightfully happy. And I have been so for the past two days . . . in a boat.

In a boat with M., who revealed herself, again, the 'all-time-sport' (and altogether an angel): for it was her own idea to rent a boat and just go off without telling anyone, "to hell with what happens while we are gone," she said—around the island; a goal I knew nothing about: I was offered, like an Oriental prince, a succession of varied surprises . . . in the form of a circle.

Slowly we went around, without bother or

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hurry or plan—we floated; it took us two days, when one would have been quite sufficient, but just as well it might have taken three. We did not care at all. We were bound to get round, eventually, but also precisely, to the point from which we had started—exactly like circling the world, which in fact we did, I told M., as every circle is around the world—is it not? She laughed. What a charming laughter she has. And it is certainly time I ceased calling her M.—what is this foolishness? Her name is Martha Baker.

Two days! I cannot start to tell you, it would have no meaning for you, '*Nature*' not being your favoured direction—but to sleep out-of-doors, as we did, at the mouth of a wonderous cave; to walk in the morning, with naked calm, on soft, cool sand—and then to dive in silent water; to cruise in the shadow of giant cliffs—and how one longs for the sun at such moments! but also the simpler pleasures: to eat our *triglie* (as well as a remarkable monster, a hairy, spiderlike crab), fresh from the sea—succulent, cooked in sea water . . . all of these and more and more; the mere delight of being small and alone, suspended, as on a petal, between sea and sky: these are eternal sensations. Go ahead and laugh. I laughed myself, for I wanted to sing and shout.

And now I am only afraid that it was all too

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hard on Martha. She is very badly sunburned, on top of which she caught one of those awful summer colds; she has several lines of fever. But even that I enjoy. It gives me a chance to take care of her. I cook, I give her tea. But mostly I feed her on cognac, of which, I may say, I also partake myself . . . I meet her smile (I just took a slug)—I do not want to leave her a minute, so I am writing this in her room, at her bedside, where earlier in the afternoon I wrote a poem; it just 'came off', as the saying goes, and I may yet send it to the *P & P*—for it doesn't seem worse, not yet at least, than the ones I sent R.H.—and who cares if it is? I enjoyed myself.

And I must tell you, André, that this jaunt was not only the 'tour' of a rock, beautiful as the rock may have been. It was an inner experience. One of those moments in life—so rare, so rare in themselves, because of the many factors, precisely balanced, that go into their making; but also so rare because we do not seize them, we shy, when they are there in our grasp, divinely offered, we are afraid, we miss our chances. It was such a moment. It struck a chord. And I was startled (as one is by a distant call, a recaptured sensation; a sensation so tenuous that it escapes description, but even now, as I write, I feel it: if only I held my breath and stepped back a pace, or for-

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ward, I would have it again—it is near, it is near . . .). I was brought to another plane, a mystic plane that was not only mine, it was also hers; whatever it was, it was *one*, *at one* with the Universe (why not? why be afraid of that?) a magic, frozen calm, very close to death. For many hours we did not talk. Martha was very pale. And if we talked at all, at last, why was it? if not that we were afraid . . . but even so, it was not easy to return to earth.

So that, in a way, we were rather relieved, in the end, to complete the circle, to *meet* again our point of departure—we moored at the very same post. We had so much the sensation of having been away for ages; we wondered if something had happened: “maybe pirates arrived while we were gone,” I said. Martha looked up. She is never quite sure of my jokes. And for a delightful instant I saw in her eyes the reflection of tattooed ogres, naked to the waist, looting, singing, carrying on, ravishing girls in nightgowns . . . (What a subject for a story: a peaceful, well-ordered, and somewhat Kafkian island, such as this one is, ‘where nothing happens’—until one day the pirates come; the old-fashioned kind with skull & bones [though perhaps they arrive in a submarine . . .]—how will the people react? the officials, the mayor, the priest, Camillo Fontana,

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Peppino & all—which ‘collaborate’ and which ‘resist’? the women, the children, etc. . . .)

But, of course, nothing had happened at all. Our absence had not even been noticed, except by the waterfront child, and they received us coldly. Where have you been? they asked, but without curiosity, and not even expecting, really, that we should answer.

Where had we been? Far away. As far away as dreams, where time has no meaning—which is why, I imagine, no one noticed our absence.

—Martha, I am going out to mail this now.

She doesn’t hear me. She is still in the dream. And it occurs to me that I am very fond of this person. Which is an announcement, André, I guess.

OSCAR

ps—It is also the end of the bottle. I shall mail this now and come back with another.

ps—2. On second thought, I am also enclosing the poem:

NOON HIGH

the heavy head
eclipsed
an instant deaf
the wind
extinguished the sand

THE MAIL BOAT

the sea withdrew
its breath
an instant
the hand
straightened out the cliff

then the beach
is breaded afresh
again the pendulum swings
the marching waves
again

and night trains
underneath

PS—3. If you think it is good enough, you may hand it in.

LETTER NO. IO

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MacCloy in Paris*

THREE DAYS LATER

July 20th

My dear André,

The moment I dropped that letter, *heard* it drop, that is, in the mailbox, I felt a pang. And since then I have had no peace. Later I tried to retrieve it, but at first I was just too stunned. I only stared at the metallic eyelid, now closed, behind which, an instant before, an instant of extreme and reckless folly (or rather at the peak of a *period* of folly, as when one decides to jump off a cliff) I had slipped the message, the 'announcement'—for I also remember, distinctly, that I used that word. Though it is not, of course, the word I regret.

"Yes," the postal officials said, "we understand very well, but . . ."—what they understood very well was a rare opportunity to enforce regulations, smiling as they did so, pursing their lips,

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thus giving curious, eyebrow effects to their fine moustaches (these gentlemen are not from here, they are sent from 'outside'—and one would think from 'above'—their speech and gestures are different; sleepily affable, round, etc.) and more than that, it was a rare opportunity to show their power—"for perhaps," they said at last, "*perchè è Lei*," because it was I (!), I would be given a chance to look at the mail before it was put on the boat, yes, it being an exceptional case, they would call me. . . . And I thanked them very much, for I was very pleased with myself . . . that they had been polite. I shall tell you some day of these creatures' power, how they 'have us', how they have the whole island, indeed, twice a week, when the boat comes in. For as soon as the boat approaches the harbour the post office closes and remains closed for several hours. You see, they need the time to process the mail. Twenty letters, maybe, and five or six parcels.

I had said I would wait in the caffè next door, and there I waited for a good three hours. I did not dare move, lest they should call me while I was away; instead I stayed patiently put, though I did, it is true, in the end, get worried . . . still, I gave myself another ten minutes. Then at last I went back to the office. "Ah! . . . but now it is too late, the mail is already on the boat . . . why didn't

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you come before? besides, you mustn't think that you had any right . . ." André, the fury of my scene will be long remembered, and even more so will be remembered the nastier one I had afterward, at the boat, when they wouldn't allow me on board. (But what was the use of that?) the *carabinieri* were called. It was all very painful. For you can well imagine, with what you know of my sense of ridicule, how much I felt like an ass.

All of which is far more grotesque than tragic, I am well aware. Except that when I came home I found Martha in a state of extreme—I don't find the word: sadness, simply. Not only had I been away for several hours, leaving her ill and alone in a gloomy house, but I had come back without the trifles she had sent me out to fetch, a few medicines and a bottle of cognac. Trifles, you see, are the stuff of madness. What monstrous thoughts had been born in her mind, had gnawed at her, during my absence. . . . One of these, that I had left the island. Poor child. And other horrors, which I would be frightened to tell you. André, I am weak. Did you know that? Few people do. But I just looked at her: she was crying. I did not say a word. (And what *should* I have said? Could I tell her about the letter? Do you see how absurd the whole thing is, how

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lunatic?) I was stupefied and numb for about five minutes; then I went to my room.

I don't have to tell you, André, why it was that I wanted back that letter. I had been in an 'euphoric' state—and what a mystic I make! really, it is all so sad . . . but I had let myself go, and not in my own direction: out of sympathy for Martha, for what she had done, for what she had tried to do, but also, my God! to have a moment of peace. And for the while I was exactly like one of those husbands who abruptly 'give in', after long resistance, and become the champions of their spouses' views. . . . A common acquaintance of ours, or former acquaintance, is a fine example in point; you know whom I mean: who after years of mild and fairly dignified liberalism became, of all things, anti-Semitic—and in what a form! . . . All Gloria's doing, of course, and her mother's and aunt's; for them, and he thought, I am sure, that it was for peace, he had given us up. Do you remember? And how he reacted to our attack? And how we roared with laughter? . . . But I think that it was only then that he really understood what it was that he had decided, what his position meant. And you know, I have often wondered: was it right to laugh (we knew it was Gloria's triumph); instead of laughing, should we not have helped him? was

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it really too late? are we not responsible for his degradation—which has something heroic about it? . . . Now, of course, he has become insane. I understand that he joined the ‘Christian Swords’ or something; one of these days he will be dropping bombs in our cellars . . .

As for my letter, I also regret it because of Martha, because I mentioned her name. Not that I wanted to keep it from you as such, not at all; nor even less, believe me, that I should have felt ashamed (it would pain me very much if you thought such a thing)—but simply that now I must tell you more, become further distracted.

Martha—I just went over to see how she was. This morning she was feeling better. She got up and she even insisted on cooking. But now she is back in bed. And I cannot escape the feeling that my having told her, earlier, that I was supposed to go out tonight, *if* she felt better, had something to do with this turn for the worse. Now, of course, I cannot go. (I was supposed to go out fishing with a gang of young boys.) On the other hand, she may really be ill. And this is no place to get ill. I feel very uneasy and worried.

July 21st

"Martha is stray. An authentic runaway, and like all runaways, lost. (They run *away*, not *to*, etc.) Eager, curious, very clever, and quick, I think. Completely uncultured." I find this in my diary, dated March 15. "She ran away, I believe, merely for the fun of running; and she stopped when she was out of breath. And out of money. Extremely charming in accepting help. God knows, I give it gladly . . . Lovely, sparkling eyes." An earlier entry: "Her accent, a sort of staccato-New York, with a Garbo tone. Her face, very pretty—often, at other times dull; variable." April: "I can listen to Martha for hours. Her stories 'kill me'. Everything she tells is lively, exciting, and *simple*: the people she talks about are thrown into life directly. Teeming with talent—dances, acts, could even write, but doesn't; she doesn't do anything. 'The Flunking Complex'. She is full of bright ideas, projects, plans, but her enthusiasms are quickly dulled and stunted; like stones that only shine when wet. Unhappy childhood." An entry in May: "Martha's yearning for motion: a feeling of missing out, of not being there when it happens; also a somewhat frantic search, as of one who is caught in a 'society game' where the point is to

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rush a free chair or to reach a *safety*. But I am always glad to see her, always glad to be that *safety*."

All of which is acute (though precious, as ever). I am rather surprised. I am also surprised that the entries should be so *few*; and there is nothing about the island, as I am not keeping my *Journal* here. The plan had been, you see, to work. . . . Of course those entries are 'cutely' incomplete; they are rather more clever than they are profound. I know her much better now, understand her much better.

You see, André, somewhere there has been a frightful miscue, or misdeal, the whole relationship is out of key. It is as though I had asked her to look out the window and instead she had jumped. . . . (Oh, I know that it is myself that I render odious, but what shall I say? *what shall I do?*)

The truth is simple and it is terrible, too, and believe me, I am not being cynical: but it is very difficult to resist adoration. And what makes the misunderstanding so huge and grotesque is that I am really fond of the girl; I find her charming, I find her delightful. But I am constantly forcing my role. I miscalculated in the beginning and now I cannot go back, I cannot set it straight. It makes me dizzy. And nothing I do seems to

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come off, my 'noblest' efforts flop. This trip around the island, for instance . . . in which I had acted a part, it is true, but a part which at last I had truly enjoyed ('went overboard,' in fact)—tonight, when I proposed that soon we we should take another, she said, "But Oscar, you had such a dull time on the last one . . ." And I feel utterly lost.

With me every hour, every minute, is the responsibility of having brought her here. Heaven knows I had meant her to be happy on the island, but because of herself, not because of me. . . . I had meant (this sounds so awful, so crude, but it is really not) that she should have her part of me, the part of me I offered, too, the one I wanted from her, a domestic, friendly, above all a benevolent part. But not a monopoly.

There was, in the first line, my work. But there was also another interest that claimed its part. Not another woman, no—but something that troubles me deeply. I told you there was a secret here. Well, now that I know what it is, it is more secret still. I am talking nonsense—André, I cannot talk about this affair, because it too has become deformed. In my childish plan, you know, I had imagined that Martha would help me, would see how disturbed I was and be on *my side*. . . . How absurd! (Of me, I mean.)

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And the result of it is, that now I am *more* absorbed, more tempted, more impotent, too. I do not blame her; but by the way she is holding me back, she is actually driving me, pushing me on.

But let us talk about my work. One month is up. And what have I done? Not once have I opened my novel. I even hate to go near it. It rests on a little shelf, not far from my table, neatly packed, like a pointing finger. But the simple thought of it gives me a lump. I am so filled with anxiety and also with guilt.

Nor have I done anything else. I never wrote that story, of course. My interest waned and now I have lost it completely. I cannot even remember what the point of it was . . .

What *do* I do then?

I try to concentrate. I try to be calm. But as soon as I tell myself: be calm! I get up and start walking around the room in a lunatic fashion. What Martha does not understand—and she tries, poor child—is that I need a particular climate; an empty silent climate, or simply: that I must be alone. (To which she answers: “But don’t we live in a lonely place . . . what more do you want?”) No, she does not understand that the artist is a delicate instrument, sensitive but easily shaken; and his fine, precise perceptions are

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utterly lost unless they are made under 'laboratory conditions'. (Which may not be true all round, but it is for me.)

I am never alone. Because to be alone I must leave her alone, too. And I know that it makes her unhappy. I hear her moving in the other room; or if I do not hear her I know that she is lying on the bed, doing nothing, being dull. And at the end I am in such a spasm that I suddenly go out for a walk. You know, maybe we should leave the island. Just call it a failure and go. But I don't have the heart.

I don't have the heart, André! For how should I say it to her? when she tries so hard, and has so much courage and childish hope? I feel helpless. And *bored*. It is a constant strain. And it is moving, too: she hangs on to me as though she were drowning. And often she plays the most hair-raising games. In baby talk: "Pretend like you're in love with me . . ." or "Let's pretend like we're married, see, and you are jealous . . ." Which is perfectly awful. Because what I pretend is that I don't understand . . . that there is no pretence, that it is all very real. And then I think that I am going crazy. That I am walking on a rope, and that I cannot stop, for if I stop, I fall . . . André, the car is speeding madly and I am watching, with a marvellous mixture of horror

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and hope, for I know that the driver has fallen asleep . . . What is going to happen? How is it going to happen?

I am going to bed now. Martha came in before. "Will you be long?" she asked. "No," I said, "I'll be over in a minute." That was an hour ago.

OSCAR

LETTER NO. II

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

ONE DAY LATER

July 21st

Dear Mamma,

How do you expect me to answer your letters when you write like that. You would think I was *at least* a criminal.

For what fun do you think it is to receive a letter that is a questionnaire? And as for Betsy's note with the dollar bill, in case I didn't have money for stamps, I don't think that's funny at all. It just makes me mad. And then you complain when I don't answer your letters. Anyway, since you sent a questionnaire, I'll answer like one.

1. *What money are you living on?* I am living on the money I earned. Not the money I brought with me here, but money I earned in Rome, giving private lessons. Reading your question again I

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don't think I like it. I wonder what you were thinking about. But none of you ever got used to the idea that I should be earning money. I remember Betsy's sarcastic remarks when I started saving up for the trip. But I guess I showed *her* at least. And I have plenty of money now.

2. *Who are these 'friends' of yours?* I don't know what you mean, but I met many interesting people, specially in Rome. One of them is Oscar Tower, the writer, maybe you have heard of him. And I also met Orson Welles. He said that maybe he could use me for a part in a picture he is preparing, but I don't know yet if I will accept.

3. *When are you coming home?* I don't know, Mamma! But I'm getting awfully tired of answering that one. Sometimes I wonder if you even want me to have a good time. Then what was the use of coming to Europe? What am I, an outcast? I feel so good each time I receive a letter from you, and for a moment I am really homesick too. Until I open it—Bang! Now even to see the envelope gets me depressed. But actually I may be coming home *very soon*. I mean it.

4. *Did you ever go to Florence and Venice?* No.

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In Italy I only saw Naples and Rome. But I mean to see Florence at least on my way back.

5. *How are we to send you the money for your trip to America?* As you know, I put the Bellevue money in the bank on a joint account, together with you, so that you may draw it whenever you wish. If you need any now, you may take it, of course. As much as you like, and you can pay me back later some time. As for my trip, all you will have to do is go to the bank and have them send a cheque to the American Express in Rome.

6. *Did you go to the dentist?* No. Italian dentists are very bad, I am told. But I did have some trouble, though. That bridge Dr. Black put in fell out. I guess I'll have it fixed as soon as I get back to New York.

7. *How are the Fontanas and how is Mario?* That question is the most fantastic of all. I don't even remember *mentioning* Mario. He is just a little boy! For who did you think it was? An Italian beau? And the Fontanas are well, I guess. Actually there are about three hundred Fontanas on the island. But the ones we know are really very nice, very quiet and friendly people, Camillo

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Fontana, his wife Assunta, and their little daughter Viola, who is an *angel*. When they see me on the street they always call me in for a coffee, though as I told you, I think, they are very poor. He is a rather old man with a very wrinkled face. His movements are slow and considered, and when he smiles he grunts a little. But you can't imagine how sweet they are with the little girl. What child psychology! Never do they scold her, never do they cross her ways. When she is naughty they laugh. It is a pleasure to watch, and of course the child, not liking to be laughed at, is rarely naughty. Once I asked them what they did when she was capricious, for she is slightly that. They smiled and shook their heads. The mother said, "She won't be a little girl for very long." And he: "Maybe she will die some day, and then how sorry we will be." Isn't that a marvellous answer? And can you imagine how the child will always remember them, and always love them?

Viola is a very bright little lady, and very curious. She is interested in everything that happens, particularly around the waterfront. Once I saw her examining a diesel engine that had just been put ashore from one of the fishing boats. She was hunching down, the way children do, *folding down* really, with the head brought

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forward, though the heels remain on the ground. Not a modest position, inasmuch as very little girls don't wear any drawers here (which simplifies matters . . .) From that posture she was looking up, very seriously, observing with tremendous concentration. Not far away, and keeping an eye on her, I saw her father, smoking his pipe. He smiled to me and grunted. "*Studia*," he said. She studies.

Mamma, I feel much better now. But you don't know how irritated I was before, when I read your letter. And now I read it again. But, Mamma, what is this danger you are thinking about? "Don't let anything happen to you," you say, but don't you realise that I'm not a child any more? I can take care of myself very well.

Though the most important thing of all is that you shouldn't worry. There is no reason for it, so please don't worry *any more*. And I am looking forward so much to seeing you again. It's going to be wonderful. We'll have a big party.

Many many kisses from

Martha

LETTER NO. 12

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Miss Janet Picard in New York*

THIRTEEN DAYS LATER

August 3rd

Dear Jenny,

I can't believe that a whole month has passed since I wrote you last. And I don't know why I don't write, don't ask me. There is really *no* reason. But I don't remember saying that I would write every week. Maybe I don't write because I'm happy. There is nothing to tell you. It's crazy how the days go by.

Nothing happens. But before you know it another day is over. Oscar gets up first in the morning, just long enough to put on the coffee, then he comes back to bed. That's the most pleasant moment of the day, and I only wish that it would last much longer—if once in a while we spent a *whole day* in bed! He tells me stories, I'm sure he could invent a new one each day. Any situation, anything at all, is good for a 'twist', as

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he calls it. Except that afterward he doesn't *write* them. If I had one of those tape recorders that I could just switch on, in no time we would have a whole book.

About ten o'clock I go to town. But by then it is already hot. Every morning I tell myself that there are so many things to do, wash last night's dishes, soak the laundry, clean the house, and I'm always so *exhausted*. I'm sleepy all the time.

Once I did go down early, and it was so wonderful, the early light. The sun was still cool and sharp. Everything quiet—those funny geometric houses and the movement of the boats at the waterfront, 'nodding', as Oscar says. At that hour it is also much more pleasant to shop. Though shopping is always nice. It's the only real contact I have with these people. They are very friendly with me, but they never seem anxious to *sell* anything, if it means to get up from a chair—and they yell too much. What iron nerves they must have to stand all the noise. They flare up over nothing and start to scream like maniacs, specially at dogs and children. And then, before you know it, all is quiet again and forgotten. Usually they call me *La Signorina*, the Miss. But they are not so innocent. They often talk about my 'husband'. Or else they suddenly ask if he is my brother, "you look so much alike."

Another trick they have is to end their questions with "*Signora o Signorina non so?*"—Miss or Mrs. I don't know? Oscar answered once for me and really stopped them cold. "Widow," he said.

What else shall I tell you? We do very little swimming, sometimes a dip before lunch or just before sundown. It's strange to have the sea so close at hand and to use it so little. It almost seems a waste. And then we go to bed early, as we have only candles for light.

For a while we played a lot of chess. He plays a million times better than I do, of course, but still I beat him *twice*. What fun that was! and he laughed so much, too. He loved it. He said he had never seen anybody who liked to win as much as I did. Playing chess was one of our fads. First it was the ants, then it was Roman ruins, then it was chess, now it's mice. They dug a little hole in Oscar's room and he does nothing but watch them all day long. He is thinking of constructing a problem-box to measure the mice's IQs . . .

Actually, something *did* happen over the week end, we had visitors. Tourist-friends. Incidentally, the tourists turned out to be no bother at all. They hardly ever come to this side of the island. Our visitors were two Americans, a literary agent, whom I already knew, and his 'esthetic' boy friend, who plays tennis I am told; and also a

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strange Austrian lady with a long nose, a dancing instructor. Oscar knew all these people. He said that they were storing up gossip for Rome, that if we turned our heads they would smell our sheets. Which may be true. But still I was very pleased when they admired the house. We get so used to it that we forget how beautiful it *really* is.

The literary agent was drunk. He kept saying "ata-girl" to me and calling me Margie, though he hardly knows me. A slob. Oscar said something very funny about him, I only hope I remember it right. "He laughs so easily that it gives him the impression that he has a sense of humour." That was a perfect description.

I'm being horribly chatty. It's how I feel to-day. *Anyway*, that same night we all had dinner at a waterfront *Trattoria*, the best of the lot, except that it has gone in for improvements, such as neon lights. I expected it would be very dull, the way it started out. They argued about a French poet who sounds like rainbow. Oscar wasn't enjoying it either, I could see. He kept throwing bread crumbs at me. After that they began telling jokes, most of them terrible. Particularly the Austrian lady, she really put out some stinkers. She is one of those people who look very 'interesting' until they open their mouths. At last Oscar said that he, too, wanted

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to tell some jokes. And he started to talk about amputation cases. It was horrible! except that it was so funny that we were almost sitting on the floor with laughter. He talked about the personal problems of amputees. And I don't know why it was so funny but all of us *cried*, we laughed so much, and he went on and on.

I'm sure that he was stimulated by these people's presence. There was nothing special about them, but their faces were new. And sometimes I think that we shouldn't live quite as isolated as we do here. He is a terrific story-teller. And suddenly I remember that he also looked extremely smart, in a black turtleneck sweater, with the neon light and the black behind him. (*My turtleneck sweater!*) I felt very proud.

Well! This is a pretty long letter for somebody who doesn't know what to talk about. I guess I *should* write to you more often, Jenny. And please continue to write to me.

Love,
Martha

LETTER NO. 13

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Prof. Thomas Purdon at Yale*

SIX DAYS LATER

August 9th

My sweet Thomas,

It took me a long time to answer your letter. It puzzled me, to start with. And then things here had changed for a while. Anyway, I'm so pleased to hear that you are feeling better. Now let's hope that there is no relapse. What does the doctor think?

I must have read your letter a thousand times. But I still can't make it out. The tone of it. What *do* you mean? "You'll be good for Oscar: you are just the person Oscar needs . . ." But where do I come in? What about *me*? Is Oscar *good for me*? Thomas, I'm crazy. But I'm going to be very clear this time.

It is the loveliest hour of the afternoon and Oscar has just left me alone in the house to go with a gang of young boys. They went to swim at

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the beach below. Actually, I had planned to go there myself today, and when he suggested that he would take a swim before going to town, I had immediately pictured, too, how nice it would be to remain there, even after he had gone to town.

But of course I should not have been surprised when I saw him wait for his friends, and when I saw that special little boy there too. (The nerve of the little bastard! to ask if I wanted to come along.)

No, I should not have been surprised. Hadn't I recognised his excited and far-removed air as he announced his intentions? And also, the quick decision to pick the *gelsi* a half-hour previous, the strange red berries that grow wild on the island. When I saw him stand on the terrace, outside our room, and heard him describe to me the movements of a group of young boys and saw him watch them rather too tensely, trying to decide, he said, whether the boys were in truth approaching the tree. How could I have missed it, that he had already discovered that the boy was near. His presence was already *acting*. Thomas! this has been going on for almost two months.

Really, sometimes I marvel at my own resilience. To prolong this relationship when he, at the mere sight of the boy, can dismiss me

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so coldly, so absolutely. He withdraws with shocking abruptness. He smiles and leaves me hanging, he doesn't *notice* my bewilderment. I am faced with a stranger! Sympathy is completely lacking.

Now I too am cold, as I write. I see it all very clearly. But it does do me good to write this down. I am alone in the house. I am trying to concentrate.

It is such a beautiful house. I remember the delight we shared when we entered it the first evening. I remember the light of the candles on the vaulted walls. The boy was with us and we had really a happy time, a somewhat drunken supper, to inaugurate our moving in. For I didn't know then, I didn't understand at all what their relationship meant. *Mario*. That's the boy's name. And it's really crazy. I have developed such a *detestation* that now just to write down his name made me shiver.

But I must go on. I want to tell you everything, right from the start. And then you will help me. It started before we got on the island. I'm sure that he had meant to warn me. He said that there was something on the island that 'disturbed' him, something he wanted to 'solve'. And other times he talked about a 'remarkable' boy on the island whom I would surely like,

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"maybe he could help you in the house," he said. That I didn't like. But I wasn't prejudiced. I had no idea, really.

Except that when we came here I didn't like the boy in the least. He is pretty, but nothing unusual. He doesn't even look very much like a boy, for he is already proportioned, I mean he doesn't have a boy's long legs and neck, what makes a boy look funny and dangling. There is something weird about this one. Like a small statue. And then he has no personality, no charm, and that's the truth. Other children are much more interesting. This one is dull. Oscar says that he is reserved and dignified. (He didn't like my criticism.) But he isn't dignified, he is just self-conscious, he has no drive. As far as I can see the only nice thing about him is his colour. Dark brown with black eyes and blond hair. Which is unusual, I guess. But there again, it is sickening to hear Oscar talk about 'burnt blond' or 'sanded gold'. Anyway, I'm sure that I was already disturbed. I didn't like a curious change in Oscar's voice when he talked to the boy, also the position of his body, the way he bent his head.

But still, it was not until about two weeks later that I really understood what he went through when he met that boy. There was a little festa in the port and we had had an amusing time, I

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remember, until the moment we saw Mario in the distance, talking to one of the sailors from the weather station. They were leaning against a wall. "There's your friend," I said to Oscar. But he didn't answer. Thomas, he was so pale, when I looked up, that I thought he was going to be sick. I took his arm. I didn't know what to do for a moment. I was frightened. Then I led him to a caffè for a cognac.

That is the situation. And maybe I wouldn't mind it so much if it were not for *his* loss of dignity. If you knew how painful it is to watch him lose interest in me, in our conversation, whenever the boy comes near. What did you mean when you said he 'needs me'? Where did you get that idea?

No, what I can't get over is his loss of poise. What *does* he see in the boy that I don't see? What *can* make a little boy's conversation bearable or even interesting? The boy, of course, is aware. And how he must mock me in his heart. And mock Oscar, too. The other day Oscar told me very seriously that I should act 'natural' with the boy, "he thinks you are jealous, you see." I nearly died. Can you imagine! He is so foolish, too, when he tries to 'explain' about Mario. He takes on a special air, completely unlike him, trying to keep the talk on an impersonal level. Which

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means to bring in all sorts of unnecessary details, like a school teacher explaining a problem, and then he *looks* like a school teacher; too. For instance, he says that I shouldn't think that there is "anything of a sensual character, really." For he insists that the boy is very 'pure'. (As though I cared!) Mario is not at all like the others, he says. He doesn't engage in those little games boys like to play when they go swimming, "you know," he says. But I *don't* know, of course. What games? Also, he told me, while other boys like to take their bathing trunks off, Mario keeps his always on, he is very modest! . . . This was supposed to have a meaning. Poor Oscar. And poor Thomas, too—it must make you sick to your stomach.

I am thinking of this afternoon. For suddenly I remember that before dressing for his swim he had talked about going to town alone. Now I know, and with shame, that he has started to lie to me. He had wanted to go alone with the boy and was afraid to admit it.

I have just been out on the terrace for a breath of air. It's about six o'clock. There is an agreeable breeze and the sun is now much lower. The rocks have turned a deep yellow. I stayed out there for about five minutes, and, to tell you the truth, I was wondering if *they* were still down at

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the beach. I couldn't hear anything. And again I had one of those horrible temptations, like the time I followed them. The boy had come to the house and he and Oscar had been playing cards on the terrace. The boy was singing, feeling high. He was probably winning. Anyway, quite suddenly they decided to go for a walk. They'd be back in about an hour, they said—but as soon as they were gone I rushed to the window, and from behind the half-closed shutter I spied on them. They went first to the *gelsi* tree. I could see Mario climbing among the branches. He was wearing only his bathing trunks, a flimsy khaki rag. Oscar was waiting underneath. Then, about ten minutes later, I saw them move up the hill. And suddenly I remembered that in that direction there was a very wonderful cave, I think it's an abandoned quarry, because it is squared inside. I had been there with Oscar. It is very spacious and clean and it has a curious floor of very fine sand. What is more, it is perfectly protected, perfect for hiding. I waited another ten minutes. My ears were buzzing. Finally I started, taking another path. I am telling you this only so that you should know how degraded I have become. Yes, I was spying on them, I was going to *catch them*. This time I would confront the situation, meet it head on. I walked very fast, slipping and

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bruising myself on the rocks. Finally I came to a spot from which I could see the entrance. I could see it only sideways, but I was right on the very thin path, close to the cliff, which is its only access.

There I waited. It was just about this hour, this light. I was shivering with excitement. And I was also afraid. What would they say when they saw me? What would I do? Would I stand up or try to hide? Would I really be able to face them? I smoked several cigarettes and I remember how my fingers trembled. Finally I couldn't stand it any more. I wanted to go back home. To hell with it all! But instead I started to walk towards the cave, making as *much* noise as possible, at the end I even started to whistle. My heart was beating wildly and I almost stumbled near the entrance.

But the cave was empty. Not only, but no one had been there for days. There were no tracks. And then I didn't know what to do. I started exploring the place. (It is not very deep.) The silence was deadly. I remember that I tried to cry and that I wasn't able. I was so exhausted. Then I had an attack of diarrhoea.

Oscar was waiting for me when I came back to the house. Come, where have you been? he called, if you hurry you'll see the most peculiar sunset

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... Or maybe he said "improbable sunset." I don't know. You see, he doesn't believe in admiring such things as a sunset or moonlight, and such. He says that one mustn't say *beautiful* when one means *astonishing*. Which may be true. But still. .

I feel constantly robbed. And not just because of the boy. But even my excitement, my impressions. Oscar is always the master of any mood. Any situation is always his. At best he consents that I 'share' it with him. But in effect he steals it from *me*. And I am so tired of having him choose what is fit for me to admire. His enthusiasm smothers mine. And then I stiffen, I feel cheated, I deny myself the pleasure of communicating with him. I become jealous of his good humour, which I feel is forced, and also of his apparent refusal to recognise my emotional turmoil. I am so tired of his humour. It is easy for *him* to be humorous, with all the good fortune he has had: wealth, travel, culture—it is this completeness, this success of his earlier life that tortures me so. It's a constant reminder of all my failings. And also of how awfully dull my own life has been.

But I am being unfair. Really he has been so good to me, too. He tries to understand. He is kind and gentle and he never mocks me, that I

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must say. And now, just to think of his voice makes me weak. How soothing it is when he reads to me. And our laughs. Such as when I waited a whole hour for the water to boil. Too much water. I was so inexperienced! Oh yes, I love him so, but what I can't bear is the role I am playing. It is unimportant. For how much more I would enjoy his stories, what he tells me of his past, and of other women, too, if it were more than just relating incidents. If it had a future for *me*. And the horrible slip he made the other night: "When we go to Venice . . ." Oh how I long to travel with him, and more than anything, to visit those places which he already knows. But when I suggested faintly, and more than once, that he should take me to Venice, he evaded the question. No, that was not for us to enjoy together.

But now I must think of the present. This boy. *Do you know what I really think?* I think that if he would just *do* something with the boy, go ahead, and stop procrastinating, and stop analysing the little midget, it would all be over in no time at all. And then he would laugh about it, too. He would see how stupid the boy really is, how *tiresome*. Hell. If he wants to have a new 'kick', as he would say, let him have it! But that's exactly what he is avoiding. He is really afraid.

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Or maybe he wants to prolong the suspense. He told me once something about desire being better than fulfilment, I can't remember exactly. I don't know.

But just now I have an image of his 'doing something' with the boy and it *kills* me. It's just too awful. To think of certain things he would do. Even the mildest thing, such as his stroking the boy's leg. *I'm going insane!* Thomas, what am I going to do? I'll do something desperate. I'm so afraid.

I'm so afraid.

August 10th

I was going to destroy this letter. I almost tore it up last night. But this morning there was another scene and now I decided that I *must* have you know. I was brutal with the boy. I treated him terribly. I said terrible things. And it is not the first time. Three days ago, Oscar doesn't know this, I threw him out of the house. I told him *never* to come back.

You see, I know nothing about this sort of thing, that's the whole trouble. I never knew one of these people before coming to Rome. I knew about them, but not even that, really, no—but

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believe me, Oscar is *not* one of those people, he simply isn't, I can't believe it. The ones I knew in Rome were not at all like him. In the first place, he is not effeminate. He is lean and hard, not muscular exactly, but he is firm. And he is wonderfully sure and deliberate in his movements. It is marvellous to see him walk, specially in dangerous places. I feel always so secure with him, so protected. Besides, I don't have to tell you *why* he isn't. Of course he isn't! But then what is this story? *Tell me*. Is it just a fad? Some new and strange experience he wants to have? Then let's get it over with, I say it again. He couldn't possibly continue *afterward*, I don't think.

What happened this morning I had already seen several times before, but it was the first time for Oscar. You see, I had noticed how little these people care for animals. They beat their beautiful little donkeys terribly and what they do to their dogs would make your hair stand on end. Except that there is one thing they do that is even worse. From time to time the children on the waterfront catch a rat. It is a great event. People come out-of-doors and look out of windows. Then, when everything is set, and amidst big yelling, the boys pour gasoline on the rat and then set him aflame. The rat runs for the water, but never makes it,

THE MAIL BOAT

he burns to death before. This morning the rat came to just about ten inches of the edge and there he turned over. Meantime everybody applauds, the women hold up their babies to see—*vedi! vedi!* they yell, while the boys engage in a sort of frenetic dance, and finally kick the smoking corpse into the sea.

Oscar had grasped my arm. He was almost hurting me and I could feel how shocked he was. And I said: You saw that Mario was one of the kids, didn't you? He swallowed his saliva, then: Yes, yes, he said, that's what's so fascinating, I can't make him out. Fascinating, Hell! I was really mad. And when we met Mario later on, I told him that he was a horror, and that they should do to him what he had done to the rat!

He probably thought I was crazy. He became suddenly very pale, smiled stupidly, then pretended to be looking for something in his pocket. After which he looked up to Oscar. And I left them there. Forgetting about the shopping, I went straight home. Oscar came home about an hour later and since then we haven't talked.

So what have I accomplished? Now he is upset. He won't be able to work again. And to think that only two days ago he had finally started on something. I hear him walking up and down in his room. He probably *hates* me.

THE MAIL BOAT

It is impossible to continue this way. Thomas, we will both be destroyed. The *weariness* will simply kill us. It must change or else it must come to an end. For don't you think I know that by objecting to the boy's presence, or by being nasty with him, I create a tenseness that only exaggerates his need for the boy. It almost justifies it, too. And obviously, his being separated from the boy doesn't bring him any closer to me. So what's the use? I should go away. But where? and why? No, only where. But I'll be even more desperate at having left what I had. I at least have something here, I have his presence. I love him, Thomas. And I cry all day, which is also no use.

I don't want him to be unhappy. I'm disturbing him, and that's the last thing I wanted to do. No. I know, I *must* convince myself to accept what I have with lightness. That's what *he* would say, I know. (But I can't even talk with him any more.) If I relaxed, everything would improve. And he, too, would feel easier and open up more. But then what? He would be even more charming and more desirable and thus pain me more.

It's impossible! The slow harm I am doing against myself, morally and physically, will *destroy us all*. Oscar, the boy, our friendship, our relationship, everything!

THE MAIL BOAT

evening

I'm going to mail this now. I have decided not to do anything until I hear from you. In the meantime I'll try to be calm. Oh Thomas, don't fail me now. Write to me. Tell me.

I kiss you.

Martha

LETTER NO. 14

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MaCloy in Venice*

FIVE DAYS LATER

August 14th

My dear André,

I am extremely embarrassed, though also amused, to a lesser extent, by your letter. It reminds me of the time E. O. Hume proposed a nude for a night club and was engaged, instead, as a waiter. He says that it gave him an 'uneasy feeling' What happened, of course, is that you only received my exalted epistle, which you call my 'outcry of long-repressed sincerity' and a little further on 'a final throwing of the mask' (you seem rather exalted yourself)—upon which you left for Venice without ever receiving the somewhat contrasting letter that followed.

And now I feel as though I were talking to a man who is partly deaf. A most unhinging sensation. This whole question of sincerity is so irritating. For if I was sincere, when I wrote that

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letter, what am I now? By *sincere* you apparently mean a lack of restraint, a lack of concern over the consequences of one's performances. But sincerity is a changeable item, it has many facets, and what is sincere one moment may be utterly false the next. And so on.

Sincerely then: I confess that I enjoyed your praise of my little poem immensely. Indeed, I read that passage so often that I finally grasped that you *only* praised the closing lines: 'the marching waves—again—and night trains—underneath'; which I like very much myself. But to be sincere, or to tell the truth, I must tell you also that you are quite mistaken. It was not the 'instant fixing of an immediate sensation' at all. Those lines are very old, I've had them with me for years; and all I did that day, before writing my gushing letter, was to 'blow them up'; they so happened to have reappeared, slipping out of an old notebook . . .

Further on you talk about Martha. And I cannot tell you how helpless it makes me feel. "She must be indeed an ideal companion . . ." Oh yes, she is, a very lovable person. But how can I even start to talk about her—if you didn't receive that second letter? It is intolerable. Nor do I feel the power to explain it again.

She wants to marry me. Which, I dare say, is

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a simple statement, as pure and straight as her desire is: she loves me. She does, indeed. It is an offering which I cannot ignore, which I cannot refuse—and I don't. I am deeply moved. But even as I say these words (and merely by saying them, too) I skirt the mark; I know, and you notice it too, I am 'holding back'; anxiety is. I feel unbearably guilty; but, on the other hand, it would be really unfair to myself, I think, if I hid it from you any longer: *she is trying to trap me.*

I am quite sure that it is not malicious, nor even designed—it is rather an instinctive gamble; to play all for all. And yet, as I now look back, I realise, I cannot escape it—I defend her with all my might, her honesty, her self-denial, her courage, all (and myself, too, in a fashion)—but the gnawing suspicion remains that traps were laid from the very start. For instance, she wants to be pregnant; and in that, at least, she may have succeeded. We are three days late as it is, we are 'sweating it out'. (I am...) And it may be more than three days. What happened three days ago was that she told me, very calmly, that she was worried about it.

Since then there has been a strange and uneasy quiet. It is like a jittery wake—but at which one is maybe not quite sure that the body is dead

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. . . At any moment something grotesque may happen. Thus there is a constant series of minor crises, matters over which we would otherwise laugh—only now they make Martha burst into tears. Too much salt in the sauce (it is ruined!), she cannot find her comb (someone stole it!); or the awful affair of the stockings today, in which I failed, absurdly, and for the hundredth time, to give the comfort which I so poignantly long to give.

Martha had decided that there was something special about the stockings the women wear on the island; and though they looked like very common black stockings to me and nothing more, I was glad, of course, to give her a pleasure. We ordered three pairs. Two 'ordinary' black and one very fancily striped in black and green. The price agreed on was three hundred lire a pair, which seemed to us an excellent bargain; but only for as long as it took us to find out that we had been charged exactly double . . . Then Martha was mad. It is that peculiar American complex, that eternal fear of being made a sucker—which has, as its corollary, the drive to 'put one over', or better still to 'get something for nothing'. (It is all part of a complicated moral construct: I will surely write about it some day—about that remarkable precept, for instance, that crime doesn't 'pay' . . .)

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Anyway, today was the day when the stockings were ready. Martha came back with the package and we were both rather thrilled; the stockings looked very fine. But before trying them on she wanted to change. It was part of our gay and childish mood. She put on some very daring black panties she has and a black brassière—then, at last, she tried them on.—But I can hardly go on at this point, it is too pathetic and sad, for she had really been gypped this time: André, the stockings were much too short . . . I saw her look at her legs, then look at me, her expression slowly changing, her lips starting to tremble . . . Then she had a fit of rage. She flung the stockings in the garbage pail, said a series of astonishing words, and finally threw herself on the bed. She howled. It was the end of all pretence, the end of shame. Just utter despair.

And what is so curious, about such situations, is that I am completely blocked; I only *stand there*, without control. I have nothing to say. But of course I knew that I had to do *something*. So I finally walked to the pail, calmly pulled out the stockings (there was fortunately nothing nasty in the pail), maybe I said "I'll see what can be done"—and then I went out.

This is becoming very long and boring, I'm afraid. (But of course it *was* very boring.) At

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the shop I gave a show of firmness. I had worked myself up on the way, so that perhaps I even sounded mad; I said that I would immediately call the police unless they agreed not only to lengthen the stockings, but also to pay back the amount that they had overcharged . . . And to my immense astonishment they quickly agreed. "You must not be nervous," they said (*'nervoso'* being a flexible term)—"it was just a mistake." But, alas, my triumph was of short duration: when I came home the mood had changed. Martha was cleaning the house. She was very cold. "Who were you with?" she asked. I didn't answer. Then, after a pause: "Why did you argue with those horrid people? now you only put *me* to shame for having made a *fool* of myself! . . ." And again she started to cry.

What shall a man do? She is so vulnerable. She is so far, indeed, from keeping a front, as women supposedly do, that she is completely exposed; and what is exposed is explosive material. Her dignity is so easily hurt—and when that happens she loses it altogether—that I find myself constantly patching her wounds, which is not an easy affair, for she makes a show of her scars. And I am so incapable of a ruthless act or word (for which perhaps she longs) that I do not resist—only postpone. . . . Once I told

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her that my motto was 'Don't leave for tomorrow what you may do the day after tomorrow'—it made her laugh. But there was a point to that.

"Who were you with?" she asked this morning. And at once I am thrown into another matter, another impasse; this one even more grotesque. She had actually made a slip, for it is part of our tacit truce, these days, that '*it*' should not be mentioned—between ourselves, I mean; otherwise it is no longer secret. For she confessed a few days ago that she had revealed the whole matter to a common acquaintance of ours at Yale.

She had sprung another trap. "Did I do something terrible?" she asked, "are you going to *hate* me for it?" She was so childish and charming. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. No, I do not hate for it. I understand too well her motivations.

But the fact remains that the word is out. You see—it concerns a rather unusual friendship I have with a boy of thirteen. Please don't squirm in your seat: it is not what you think—it is almost *nothing*, in fact, which is why I so much prefer that you should learn it from me, rather than from someone else, as eventually you undoubtedly would: you know how such rumours spread. It is the one accusation that is always believed,

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from which no person is safe. (Have you noted this curious fact? Try it for jokes. You will never be doubted and anybody at all will do. The President of the United States. General MacArthur. "Oh? is that so? yeah, yeah, sure, now that I think of it . . ." possibly followed by: "Of course! . . . you know, I can tell one a mile away . . .")

There *was* almost nothing at first. I had noticed the boy last year, and though we never talked, except the very last day, the very last hour, which is when I told him, too, that I would be back this summer, I had entertained for him a friendly and curious feeling. Which is why I wrote to him later, during the winter, and why there grew between us a strange and increasingly 'sympathetic' correspondence. It turned out that he had noticed me no less than I had noticed him—which, when I think of it, he could have hardly helped, since I held him constantly under my eye. Such is his beauty. It alone would make me stop. It is unique: if you saw him but once you would understand. So he was aware, of course, of attention, annoyed by it too, perhaps (but I don't think so, on second thought: I often observed him when he played with his friends, apparently intent on the game, but suddenly he would glance my way and search for me, almost anxiously, whenever

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I moved from my post; at other times, passing close to where I stood, he would affect that he did not see me, but then he revealed himself by a change in his movements, an almost imperceptible *raise* [as though to say: I'm quite at my ease] and by a certain rowdiness which he otherwise never displayed; or else, when he was alone, he passed by very quickly, without looking at me—but I would see him smile . . .). However he was not aware of the cause, of that I am certain; his beauty went quite unnoticed: it is what makes it unique and what allowed it to blossom. Like a beautiful bird or like a platinum fox in a forest. He was unaware . . . until I told him about it, until I embarked, was *forced* to embark, on this road of folly—but more about this later.

Of course I wanted to know him better, I was curious about him and very glad, too, of what transpired in his letters of an apparent fondness. Eventually I wrote to him that I was coming back and that with me there would be a '*signorina*', whom I rather placed in his care. You see, I had wholly expected that they would be friends . . . it was an idyllic conception. I pictured her teaching him English; or I imagined the two of them playing and swimming, or setting off for hikes, while I, of course, would be sitting at home, piling up orderly pages . . . But I don't need to

tell you that not one of these hopes came true; not even the boy's affection. I found him changed. He had grown very little during the year (he seemed almost smaller, in fact) and yet he had changed; he was not a young boy any longer, an undefinable factor of charm was lost. His beauty was with him still—but it seemed to have strangely cooled; it had lost its radiance. Now I know, of course, that he is not very well; he has disquieting spells of dizziness, accompanied, often, by a violent pain in one of his shoulders—growing pains, maybe; but not sufficient to account for the change. Perhaps I expected too much. But it is certain, at any rate, that our meeting had none of the expected warmth. A laconic handshake. "*Come stai?*" he said, frowning and not even looking at me. I said nothing myself. Then I saw Martha (she had arrived on the island four days before) and almost her very first words were about *my* boy, as she called him, to tell me that he got on her nerves already. "I think he's queer," she said.

One thing may be said about Martha: she is very direct. Her strategy consists in charging—which is also what makes her charm: she is so much a woman and so little what a woman is supposed to be . . . I marvel at it." She is full of surprises. But unfortunately what often spurs her

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on is that puritanical passion for tearing down curtains, that need for 'frank situations'—as though a situation were ever frank—without any shade or grading, choose your side: it is this or it is that. For you can well imagine, my friend, that from accusing the boy to accusing me the distance was short.

I saw the boy fairly often. He came to the house, we went on walks, he ran errands for us; there were all the appearances of a normal situation, as there was always a pretext for his coming here, usually to bring us something, and then we would ask him to stay for lunch. It was normal and extremely *dull*—which was partly my fault. I was utterly unable to amuse him. Martha's words had entered so deeply that his mere appearance had the effect of making me stiff. I lost all ease. And the more clumsy I was, the more I was conscious that the child was bored; and at last I would feel so sorry for him that I would send him off: he fled like a beast released from a trap . . . What was I after? I wonder. I imagine that in some childish fashion I wanted to help him, be for him the friend that I had longed to have at his age. But of course he was not in the least bit anxious; I was never aware of the slightest interest, except lately perhaps, when I started telling him how pretty he was. (I am such an ass.)

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I am sure that he doesn't trust me. We are both uneasily formal and shy. And indeed there can be no doubt that soon I should have ceased to see him altogether. It would have been a most natural end, a peaceful extinction—if Martha had not pushed me on. She wanted me to 'face the situation clearly'—and her insinuations had the lightness and subtlety of a howitzer blast: "Are you in love with the boy?" she asked—and she asked other things, too.

It became an obsession. I was pursued by the most incongruous associations, the most awful dreams—and also longings. Although I have never been closer to him than to shake his hand, his proximity makes me dizzy. I stare at him—like a demon or madman . . . Sometimes it occurs to me that he will not live very long; too fragile, too mortal, indeed—and then it seems to me that there could be no *development* to such perfection. But how I behold his features! The groove of his neck, his slender feet and hands (he bites his nails) his delicate ears, his lovely colourless lips—a down of silver against the light . . . On his brown chest there hangs a golden medal with which he likes to play; he puts it in his mouth.—Do you think that I am going insane? Maybe I am. For I am also afraid. I have no experience. Once I saw him fight with another

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boy—and suddenly his shirt was torn, exposing his back. André, I *felt* that tear and it is a wonder that I didn't shriek . . .

Which is just about all. You can imagine the rest—except, perhaps, the doubt that I constantly have: am I a monster or am I a fool? In other words, I am not *really* sure that the boy is innocent or as innocent as he seems to be. He may be enjoying himself, asking himself how long it will last, how far it will go—he may be laughing at me. For there have been provocations, or I have thought that there were, which I have feigned to ignore. But they keep me awake. And to tell you the truth, I even had such doubts about him last year . . . I must say this in fairness to Martha, of whom I may have drawn a too blunt and even malignant picture—and that she is not, she is not malignant. I appreciate her very much; more than she thinks.

At present, as I told you, there is a period of peace. And I want to preserve it. I have been working well these past few days, ploughing drudging on, filling in pages. Something will come of it, if the quiet persists. It is the peculiar quiet that follows a skirmish, when perhaps in a fling of 'horseplay' a few blows were exchanged too roughly, almost seriously: afterward there is such a calm, a somewhat exaggerated politeness—

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both contenders rather pale and formal: "sorry, sorry, I hope I didn't hurt you . . ." At present we are nursing just such a calm, in *expectation* of something . . . I don't know what. Perhaps the announcement that Martha is pregnant.

No, I don't think that. I am too well prepared: I have made up my mind about that already. And Martha, at least, would be very happy, I hope.

Then what? I have no idea, but you shall learn about it soon, I guess.

OSCAR

P.S.—It is so weird to think of you in Venice. (This must sound as though it came from the grave . . .) Tell me about the concerts and about the ballets, about the wonderful life. Is David Orr coming down for his film?

LETTER NO. 15

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Prof. Thomas Purdon at Yale*

FIVE DAYS LATER

August 21st

My dear Thomas,

No letter from you. I don't know why I had expected that you would answer immediately. And then I have the terrible fear that perhaps my letter was lost. I should have sent it *registered*. No, I must be patient. You will surely answer, you will not let me down. But in the meantime I run down to every boat . . . I was so sure there would be a letter today.

Here I have given up on all points, as I said I would. The boy is in the house right now. He came with a little friend of his and now they are teaching Oscar how to string a fish net. From the way it sounds it must be hilarious. But at least there is peace. It even seems like a livable life.

Oscar is very grateful to me. Yesterday we were away all day, just the two of us. I know that

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he did it only to please me, but afterward he enjoyed it too. We walked to the lighthouse, at the southern tip of the island, something we had planned to do since the first days we came here. It was a beautiful day. The sea was rough. And we had such a good time, walking under cliffs and exploring caves, that it did not matter at all at the end that the lighthouse was a big disappointment. I don't know what we had expected. Everyone told us how 'beautiful' it was and we had often caught glimpses of it in the distance, and once from the sea. A white tower at the end of a dark peninsula. But what we found under the tower, at the end of our long and rather dangerous walk, was a plain, red brick house. It is the first brick building we have seen on the island, which must be why they called it beautiful. Around it was a level expanse, bordered by a high brick wall. The house was very ordinary with rows of grated windows. It looked like a prison. Over the door was a date: 1882. But nothing else, no sign of life. Probably the guards were asleep. And probably I would have been scared to death if I had been there alone. The wind was howling through the rocks and there was a noise as of something banging a piece of tin—also a strange screech that came from the tower. Oscar poked around the house, he was in very good spirits, he

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knocked at one of the windows. Nobody home, he said. So then we went back to the ledge that connects the lighthouse to the island, where we found a protected spot for our picnic. On one side of the ledge was wind and a furious sea, but on the other side it was perfectly calm. We swam and amused ourselves in the sun.

Thomas, I tell you all this because it was a happy moment, and there have not been many such moments. He talked to me about his work. He is writing something about the island, about the people here, who, according to him, are closely bound by envy, hatred, and marriage. 'A perfect sample'. At the bottom are the outcasts, the destitute who have nothing at all, not even a house. They live in caves where they have returned to a sort of animal state, and nobody seems to care. I used to feel so indignant about it, but even I have become accustomed. The island is cruel. There is an incredible lack of charity. Oscar says that nobody pities the derelicts because they are 'too poor', there is no hope, and therefore the pity'd be wasted . . . And at the top he does not place the mayor or the priest, but a strange character whose name is Don Pompeo. He owns the power plant—a broken-down diesel affair that tuff-tuffs a few hours every night. Don Pompeo is a big man, about sixty

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years old, very ceremonious . . . He spent many years in West Virginia from where he came back with a fortune and a great love for the English tongue, which he speaks suavely and with a real sense for the American rhythm. Only he doesn't think that in English it is necessary to *say* anything as long as you complete a sentence. What he says makes very little sense. And he always closes with "yessir, that's what I always say: Blood is blood. Blood is blood . . ." He loves Americans. He spots them as soon as they get off the boat and then follows them with his wonderful talk and with his hat in his hand. His great moment was when the Americans were on the island during the war, his 'darling boys', he calls them. Generals came to see him and he says that he helped them plan the invasion . . . Oscar never tires of his talk and he answers him in the very same accent and style. He is also rather wicked with him. He tells him, for instance, that the people say that his electricity is no good. "Ah, the people are stupid! If they don't like my lights I'll take them away, I'll sail off in a boat and leave the island in the dark!"

I don't know how much of this is true. It is seen through Oscar's eyes—but it's wonderful to hear when Oscar tells it. And I also don't know how much of this he has written down. I have

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yet to type my first page. The arrangement had been that I should type for him. Oh, I want him so much to work. I want to help him. It is hard to explain—I would be happy to sacrifice *hours* so that he could write, but, and I cannot go on from here, I know that afterward—what? I leave him alone. But when the boy comes, then he is *always* ready to give up his work. An hour once in a while doesn't matter to him. But to me! It is an hour he could have spent with me. Tell me, am I hopelessly selfish?

But as I said, at least now there is peace. And actually I have almost grown fond of the boy. He is very responsive to any sign of affection. I took him around the shoulder today and I was surprised that he didn't resist. He immediately leaned against me. What conquered me, perhaps, is that two days ago he suddenly fainted. It gave us a terrible scare. I instantly rushed to his help. Oscar only stared. And now, of course, Oscar doesn't believe that I was sincere. He 'thanked' me even. But poor Mario, it is not his fault. If it were not he it would be something else, I know, anything to distract him from *me*. He is tired of me. Afraid of me.

I bore him. And do you know what I also think? I think he would deserve a very different woman. Much brighter and more sensitive and

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dignified. For what fun would it be to attach him to me when I'm so awfully *ashamed* of myself, for everything. What I want is impossible. I don't begrudge him the boy. But it would be really best that I went away. Otherwise poor, innocent Oscar gets uncalled-for unpleasant behaviour from me—not realising how much I've been through the few hours that we were separate. I cannot bear his being affectionate because he is 'human'. He is sorry for me. And so I'm not happy that he is kind and sweet and the best friend I could ever have.

Isn't it better if I went away? He cannot give me what is impossible for him to give. He cannot be possessive because he doesn't want me. And he cannot understand what bothers me, why I am so tense, why I cry all the time. He doesn't notice that my heart is breaking, many times when I am with him, even sleeping along side of him, simply because he doesn't want to. And why should he? What could he do if he did? Yes, he's afraid of me.

But there is nothing wrong with passion. That, too, is fun. Where that comes in now, I don't know. It was on my mind. He professes a strong dislike for passion. He hates excess, anything 'desperate' it's like being drunk, he says. He hates people who lose control of themselves. But it only means that he is not attracted to me. He

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shies from the slightest pressure, which he calls 'violence'. But it's so foolish for him to say such things. The other day Oscar was playing with a belt and suddenly, for no reason, he lashed the boy across the legs. It was so sudden and vicious that I was too shocked to breathe. The belt left deep red marks. He apologised, he hadn't meant it, he said. But the boy almost started to cry. Afterward he was very quiet. I remembered the expression on Oscar's face as he struck. I don't think that I shall ever forget it.

Sometimes I feel that I don't know him at all. Or that his gentleness is only on the surface. For instance, his humour is often so weird, he likes to laugh about the most *dreadful* things. By the way, did you know that at one time he studied to become a priest? He told me, too, that when he was a little boy and people would ask him what he wanted to become, he would always answer: "A saint."

Maybe I'm living with a madman.

My dear Thomas, you must write to me immediately, if you haven't done so already. Perhaps there is a letter on the way. But if not, please sit down and write at once. I cannot tell you how much I need your help.

I kiss you as ever,

Martha

LETTER NO. 16 (not mailed)

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

THREE DAYS LATER

August 24th

Dear Mamma,

You must send me the money immediately. I must get away from here, the sooner the better. I'm in serious trouble, Mamma. *Cable the money.* Just my name is enough. You'll get this letter on the 28th and the next day I should have the money.

It's as you always said. I wait till the last moment and then it's too late. If I had only come home. But I think that it's really too late this time. I'm afraid I'm pregnant.

I had to tell you. But please be calm. Don't make a scene. It's better perhaps if I didn't come home, I'll take a room somewhere. But I *must* get away from here. Don't blame me. It is too late for that. I'm here on this awful island and I have no money, I don't know what to do. Poor

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Mommy, I'm only sorry for you. Really, I don't care about the others. And for me there is nothing left, I don't even cry any more, there is nothing to cry for. I wish I were dead—ah yes, I do.

And how I look back. How I had wanted to come to Europe, for years, you remember, you wouldn't believe me. You were all against me. Mommy, that's why I was so hard at the boat when you cried. It broke my heart. But I just *had* to go. I could not turn back, no, and I don't even know what I expected to find here. Something different. I had big ideas. Maybe I thought that I would be able to make the Italian movies. Some crazy idea like that. Though I knew all the time that I wouldn't succeed, even as I left on the boat. You don't know how scared I was. And then all alone for months.

But anyway, now it's too late, we must think about *now*. Mommy, the baby. I don't know. I just don't know. I'll have to go away some place. If I could only *think* of something. But all I think of are the faces you'll make. Maybe papa won't let me in. Or else you'll all feel sorry and pity me, and that would be worse. I can just *see* Betsy's expression . . .

But at least now there will be no more of that foolish pretence. Of that I am *glad*. All of you will know what I am, and what I am up to. May-

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be that's why I went away. All that talk about my future and the great expectations that were in store for me. I couldn't stand it any more. And then, when the hopes started to fade, and I wasn't too young any more, that anxiousness to have me settle. It drove me insane. There was one thing I was sure of, at any rate, I didn't want to end up like Betsy. And don't think that I am being hard again. Ah, this is all so miserable. It had to come to this. Mamma, I'll do whatever you think is best. There is only one thing I want you to promise. Never ask for his name. For I will never ask him to marry me. *Never*. That is my promise.

I hate him. I'm afraid of him, too.*

* *This letter was never sent.*

LETTER NO. 17

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

THE SAME DAY

August 24th

Dear Mamma,

I have very good news for you. I am coming home. All I need now is the money—and then I'll just hop in the boat . . .

But before you cry out—there is a catch. Not a big catch, a small one. I want it to be a secret. *Not even papa should know.* Can you keep such a secret?

Now this is what I want you to do: Go to the bank and have *them* cable the money directly to me. I shall lose on the lira exchange but that doesn't matter. It will be so much faster. Only remember the secret. I want it to be a complete surprise. Perhaps I won't even tell *you* what boat I take.

Mamma, it will be wonderful to be home again! Now that I've decided I can hardly *wait* for the

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moment. We'll have a big party, and how many stories I will have to tell . . . Only now you must hurry.

A thousand kisses from

Martha

PART THREE

LETTER NO. 18

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MaCloy in Venice*

TWO DAYS LATER

August 26th

My good André,

Thank you very much. I am really very moved by your quick response. But . . . I am afraid that I must have drawn too gloomy a picture—for I just cannot say that I feel your alarm, not to-day, not on this beautiful, lazy afternoon, in its perfect stillness (a momentary *darkness*) with only the dozing noise of the sea far away . . . Martha is on the terrace taking down the clothes, slowly, one pin at a time; she is distracted, she looks towards the sea while her hands remain on the line. What an elegant pose. She washed her hair this morning and now it is *up*. No, André, I cannot say that I have any sense of 'impending doom'. Or perhaps the mere fact that you should be so concerned about me makes me take a lighter view; it also makes me feel rather foolish. I have

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an embarrassing vision of you appearing here on a rescue mission . . .

But, of course, you may be right. It may be high time that we left the island, I have thought so often myself, particularly the last few days, and I have also a feeling that Martha, who has quite lost her initial enthusiasm, would gladly assent. And yet—I feel a strange reluctance to take the step. You see, in a sense I haven't even begun to work; I should be oppressed if I left, not only by the feeling that I had wasted time but by the idea that *I had missed a chance*. And I am not talking about my novel now, the novel can wait, but about my island material. I have a large array of notes, preparatory work, a lining up for action; but, except on the most superficial and humorous level, I feel peculiarly uninventive; my characters remain without challenge, I am unable to face them with what I call the essential themes: love, death, friendship, faith and lack of faith, and most of all *the quest for praise*, the basic motor force of doing well in the presence of witnesses—'*fare bella figura*'. I have no drama.

And yet the island is a perfect stage. I have thought so from the very first. Stark, simple, in my notes I call it 'absolute'—and that it is, almost monstrously so, in its sharp and arid landscape, the clinical architecture (the angular whiteness

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of it) the spotless sky, the dark and dangerous sea all around; and the mere fact alone that it is an island, thus any action is physically bound, must by necessity fall back on itself or else escape, disappear. And to escape, indeed, is a constant strive, it is on everyone's tongue—even on that of tourists: they find the island 'lonely', but rarely do they stay for more than just a few days, from one boat to the next, they 'cannot stand it', they say; and there is a fraction of panic in the way they run to the boat. It is certain, at any rate, that aside from the tourists only few succeed in escaping. I don't know what holds them; an eerie magnetic spell—or simply inertia, habit, 'the temptation of safety'. And eventually the impulse dies. Then they say, "Yes, there was a time when I could have left . . ."

But what attracts me most, on the island, is its social seclusion and, as a consequence, the binding closeness of every relation; there is no chance of hiding here, there is a constant watch (one result: there are no thieves, for where go with the loot? etc.); gossip is murderous. Martha also claims that there is no shame, and it is true, perhaps, that there is an odd indifference to suffering, to gross injustice, a 'realistic' brutality, which, however, is only shameless to us, it can imply no lack of shame on their part where respectability

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is of such prime importance, when every slightest motion or sign is instantly weighed and, as it were, *policed* by gossip. There is a rigid choreography of behaviour, stylised, extremely subtle, from which no islander would dare to depart—as on a stage, indeed. It is what charms me so. The mood I wish to capture. A perfect stage for a perfect drama. Movement slowed down to symbol, and through the symbol, at my will, brought out—as by a spotlight or as the close-up does in the movies.

Reticent people, though. They will not be approached. They are very curious themselves, even blunt; but if you ask them something in return they only laugh, particularly the women, or answer vaguely; at once on their guard. They mock us, of course. It is a wholly accepted protective device; under the heading 'mockery', indeed, I have placed a number of incidents which otherwise I could only call 'strange behaviour' . . . Let me give you an instance. Not long ago, on one of my walks, I met a young boy who was leading a goat. I knew him slightly, I knew his father, that is, and so, just to be friendly, I placed a few simple questions.

"Where are you leading that goat?"

"I'm taking it home. We keep it in the kitchen at night."

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"But I thought you had a pen for it on the hill."

"Yes, but we don't leave it there now."

"Why?"

"Because of the season."

Long silence. Then:

"Why don't you keep it there in the season?"

"Because of those who kill them."

"Who are those?"

"They are the people who kill the goats."

Another long silence.

"You mean they butcher the animals?"

"No, they only kill them."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, sometimes they stab them, but not always. At Italo's they choked them with a cord."

"But why do they do that?"

"Nothing. It's the season."

We walked on silently for a while and then I left him; but at the first turn I put down our dialogue in my notebook, verbatim. And really, I wonder whether he was *only* mocking . . . (Twelve years old.)

Such is the atmosphere. It is what I wanted to tell you: why I don't feel free to leave the island. Not yet, at least. But in the meantime please don't worry and don't come down here

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unless you want to *really*, for your own good pleasure. Otherwise amuse yourself in Venice . . . and tell me about it.

OSCAR

LETTER NO. 19

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Prof. Thomas Purdon at Yale*

FIVE DAYS LATER

August 31st

Dear Thomas,

Your letter just came. It is very short. But I haven't had time to study it yet. Something terrible happened, now everything is changed. Oscar doesn't know it yet. I'm writing this at the port, I can't get myself to go home.

The boy died this morning. Mario. He had been ill for two days and we didn't know it. This morning I went down to do the shopping and afterward I went to our friends the Fontanas for a coffee, as I often do. And they told me. It happened suddenly, they said. But they seemed to me so matter of fact. In front of me they told their little girl, about five years old, that Mario was dead, but either she didn't understand or she pretended not to, for she continued to crawl around the room on all fours. It seems so unreal.

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I can't believe it. Three days ago he was at our house and perfectly well. Mrs. Fontana kept saying to me, "*Vedi, vedi, come succede*"—You see, you see how it happens. Nodding. *How* did it happen, I asked. But they didn't know, they only said that it happened suddenly. Then she said that I should go and see. They had put the '*povero*' Mario on a table, surrounded by candles, and the mother was crying and shouting. But I didn't have the nerve to go. What would I do there? So I went to the post office where I got your letter—we hadn't gone to the boat last night. Thomas, I'm putting all this down as it comes, I must do something.

I'm so nervous, I'm trembling all over. I must tell you, I already feel that it was my fault. Something stupid happened, three days ago, the last time he came to the house. I was in a disagreeable mood, I felt that the boy was overstaying, just loafing around the room. Then suddenly I saw him pull out *my* comb from his pocket and start to fix his hair, a comb that had disappeared about two weeks ago. He had stolen it. I almost pounced on him. No, he said, he had found it. Where? He didn't remember where. Then he wanted to give it back to me, but I refused—now that he had used it he could keep it, I said. I also said something about it being filthy. So he put

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it back in his pocket and left, without greeting. The next two days, when I went for our shopping, I didn't worry at all about not seeing him—I thought he was avoiding me. I never imagined that he could be sick. But now I think that maybe he was already ill when he came to the house. There *was* something strange about the way he hung around.

But the worst is going to be Oscar. You don't know. He loved the boy so much! What will he do? And now I almost started to cry. It's all so crazy, I've never felt such a shock, and I only hope that we won't have to go and *see* the boy. But I'm sure that Oscar will want to.

This had to happen now, just when Oscar had started to work. Yesterday, for the the first time, he gave me a large number of notes to 'disentangle', he said, though they were perfectly neat already. He was in wonderful spirits, completely absorbed. This time I could see that he was really getting at something.—But to make matters worse, the material he showed me was mostly about Mario's father, who is slightly lunatic. His latest fixed idea is that he will be elected mayor. They are incredibly poor, their house is falling to pieces. And the boy was the only thing they had. They were so proud of him. Once we invited the father for lunch—the boy refused to come along

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—and at first he talked about China, he was several years in China with the Italian navy. “When I dream I am always in China,” he said. He clowned about the Chinese girls. He was a little drunk. Then suddenly he started to talk about Mario, how intelligent he was, how much he studied, and how he, the father, with his ‘influence’, would help him get ahead. “He will be a sergeant in the carabinieri,” he said.

I’m losing time. I’m so worried about how I will tell it to Oscar. If there were only some way to prevent him from knowing, I would do anything to prevent his finding out. But that is impossible. There is nothing to do but to tell him. Then I will see what happens. Maybe he will react very differently from what I expect. But I’m afraid. There is no telling with Oscar. I will be near him, though. That is my duty now. To help him over this terrible moment, and then, if he agrees, to go away with him, as fast as possible, just as you said that we should. Thomas, now I’m going up to the house. But I will write again very soon and tell you what happens.

I kiss you.

Martha

P.S.—I just reread your letter. I was in such a hurry the first time that I missed what you said

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completely. It is such a surprise. Does it mean that you are getting married? Oh, Thomas. Who is the girl, anyone I know? That with everything else today! I'm selfish, I have no right to be, I know, but in a way I had never thought that you would get married. I hope she's nice, at least. Anyway, she'll be better than me.

Don't mind what I'm saying, I'm just crazy today.

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MaCloy in Venice*

THE SAME DAY

Night, August 31st

My dear André,

The cool hour of the night. I put on a sweater. I could not sleep. Martha, too, was awake for hours, but now she has finally yielded. I covered her carefully, then I got up. I lit a few candles.

I must tell you what happened today. But I don't want to hurry. My watch is on the table. It will not be dawn for several hours, I have plenty of time. Let it come out by itself, let it slowly unfold like a snake, without effort.

At intervals, for as long as I can hold my breath, I remain perfectly still. I listen. I am under a spell—I mean, of my own tension (for what else?) but already, since I started to write, my tension has begun to decline. Indeed, it is almost deliberately now, in order, mostly, to recapture myself and maintain my mood, that I

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caused a shiver to stir in my spine: rapidly it rose to my neck where it snapped, with a jerky, shaking-off quiver.

Loosening its hold; there can be no doubt about it, I am loosening up. It is a strange sensation—a defreezing process. Even the silence around me has changed, as though suddenly relieved of pressure, afloat, and settling slowly in the dark. Slowly the spring unwinds: I relax. I feel peculiarly lucid, I tick precisely. Exactly ten minutes have passed.

As you see, I am watching closely. I am observing myself, my moves, my heartbeat even. You may think that it is pretentious, but I often do that, in a fashion, before I get down to my writing. Afterward I simply destroy the first paragraphs. A limbering up—except that now it is more than that, I must do everything in my power, concentrate to the utmost, to recall, to recapture *exactly* what happened, in every detail.

Martha went to town this morning and by lunchtime she wasn't yet home. I didn't worry about it too much, she is often late for lunch. I simply cooked myself two eggs and then I returned to my work. And it was only two or three hours later that I suddenly awoke to the fact that she had not returned. Immediately I

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had the sensation that something had happened. A great stillness. I rushed to the terrace: no sign of her on the road. Alarmed, I started to run towards town, but I didn't run far; Martha was sitting on a stone about halfway down the hill. She didn't move when she saw me approach. "What happened?" I yelled to her. "Nothing," she said. Which actually did not reassure me at all. Something had surely happened to her. I helped her to her feet and took the bags. We started towards the house. But after a few steps she stopped again: "Mario is dead," she said. (Mario—the young boy I had got myself so strangely involved with during the summer.)

Precisely what went through my head, the first instant, I cannot remember. I said the obvious things: "How can it be? how did it happen? it's impossible . . ." (She did not know how it happened. The doctor said that it was a 'congestion'.) Again and again I said that I did not believe it; I asked her to tell me all she knew. But in truth I was only gaining time, trying desperately to achieve a composure, an appropriate attitude. For it was not true that I did not believe it: I believed it at once. I was surprised—at first—in a strange way, as when one's forecast is confirmed; not, of course, that I had expected his death, but only that I had

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thought sometimes, I must confess, that his death would have meant a *solution*. That lasted only a moment. Then, almost at once, there came a tēnseness, the abrupt realisation that *I* was involved; that *I* had a responsibility (ill defined, it is true); there was a death, there would be formalities, bother; I would be caught in a round of ceremonials that were foreign to me—indeed my first impulse must have been to escape . . .

We came home. We sat at the table, facing each other. For a long time we did not talk. She was looking at me and I felt that she expected something, some decisive reaction, and mostly, perhaps, I was afraid that she would ask: ‘what now?’—so finally I said: “I am thinking about the Maresciallo and about the poor mother.” “Yes,” she said, “poor people, it’s going to be awful for them.” Absurd things that one says. Ordinary language is so inadequate for these occasions.

The Maresciallo—we thought him rather a clown until now. One of our favourite characters: “A small, thin man, with a beautiful head; fine silver hair, the rapacious face of a night bird, brilliant eyes—very mobile, anxious, avid; ready for action but also for flight. Quick, curious gait, his feet are flat and he has a low centre of gravity, like a bottle; his legs shoot out rapidly from under

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his three-quarter coat. Always busy, always in a hurry, waving smartly to us from a distance—a brief-case under his arm. His clothes are neat, but there is a big patch in his beautiful coat, and there are holes in his well-shined shoes.” The Maresciallo amused us very much. A mystery man. From where did he get his title? A nickname, of course, but on what basis? We know very little about him. Until three years ago he was an employee of the *Comune*—but why was he dismissed? He claims that it was the work of his enemies. (He sees enemies everywhere.) Since then he has had no job; he became a letter writer. He writes letters for one hundred lire a piece, documents for two hundred lire. Very dignified; when he deigns to stop for us on the street it is always to say something ‘important’, strictly confidential—a few words which he whispers quickly, and which we usually don’t understand. But in spite of his dignity he is very cool about accepting gifts—even money. Once he asked me to ‘lend’ him two thousand lire. I gave him one thousand. We laughed at him; but it might well be that all along he was laughing at us—from us, whenever he wanted to, he could receive free cigarettes, free wine, free food—and for free a most attentive public. We loved his stories, his interpretations of the world situation;

he is an excellent mime and with us he felt free to clown (which embarrassed the boy) about his 'tragedies', even. "But some day I will have my *rèvenge*," he would say, "I'll be the chief around here, just you wait and see, or my name is not Maresciallo!" His wife, Elisa, we liked rather less. She is still a beautiful woman—the boy's features came mostly from her—but crude, malicious, unexpectedly prone to bring forth disagreeable sexy insinuations. With a very foolish laughter, too. But what I particularly disliked about her was her constant mocking of the Maresciallo—mostly for our benefit, or rather for *my* benefit, I believe. All her misfortunes she traced back to him. "I could have had any man I wanted," she would say, "and I picked this vagabond!" Poor Maresciallo. And sometimes her accusations were weird. "The night he came back from the war, our cupboard fell down, just detached itself from the wall, can you imagine? and all our dishes were broken—we had so many beautiful things (*tanta bella roba!*) three coffee sets with golden rims, from America—that man! he's my ruin. Since then we have had no dishes." There was only thing they agreed upon completely, that bound them closely: the boy. They worshipped the boy. They spoiled him—the *bambino*. The Maresciallo told me that he

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was working only for him ("not for that ugly woman!")—etc.

We went down toward evening. It had been a sluggish afternoon—we had lost a lot of time; I don't know how. I had had trouble in compelling Martha to eat something; we were both very nervous. But at last we set out. We walked rapidly, stiffly; she was tightly gripped at my arm while I strained and did my best to look calm and 'easy'. There was a rumbling storm in the sky; jagged lightnings but without any thunder. When we reached town it was getting dark.

The Maresciallo's home is beyond the Roman tunnel—two barren rooms upstairs of a lonely, rectangular structure; a steep outside stairway, without a railing, leads to it from the street. We saw lights at the window as soon as we came out of the tunnel, and almost at once we heard the wailing. I faltered a moment. I slowed down our pace. You see, I'm so unfamiliar with death; and I must have hoped until then, I imagine, in spite of what I said before, that at the last moment it would have all been denied—we would have come down and found that it was all a mistake. But there could be no such doubts any longer. As we came closer I noticed that there were shadows, people, sitting on the low wall in front of the house—looking up to the window, listening to

the wails. We were at the foot of the stairs. I went up first, with a sort of grim determination, a slightly foolish need to dominate, to be 'on duty' in the trial ahead. Really, I don't know *what* I expected to find upstairs. The door was open.

At first, as I stood on the threshold, I had only a sensation of brilliant light, of many candles. I looked immediately to the corner where I remembered Mario's bed. There was the bed but it was empty. Then I saw the Maresciallo coming towards me, blocking my view of the room. "Ah, you have come," he said—he kissed me on both cheeks; I responded weakly—"Grazi, grazzi," he said. And then he must have seen Martha for he left me stranded, halfway inside the room. There was a table in the centre and I knew that the boy had been placed on the white sheet that reached to the ground; but I did not look. On one side of the table there were two rows of chairs (or more) arranged in a semicircle, most of them occupied by women. On the other side there was only one chair. On it sat an unbelievably dishevelled woman—the wails had come from her. I did not recognise her at once; I only reasoned that it was Elisa. As I came in she was swinging from one end of the table to the other, touching the table, then she sat erect, she raised her hands, she rolled

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her head from shoulder to shoulder; and as she did so I saw that her eye was fixed on me. All eyes were fixed on me. I started to move towards the table. I had no idea of what I was supposed to do. I found myself standing at Elisa's side; she was still staring at me, and still I did not look at the boy. Her wailing had a definite tune, a fixed cadenza that strangely deformed her words:

"E' morto-u miu fi-gliu

"E' morto-u figliu mi-u . . ."

Then I noticed the word "Americano"; I listened more closely: "And now the Americans have come to see him—but he is dead—he visited them in their house on the hill—but now he will play with them no more—my son is dead! my son is dead!" Martha was near me now. "Come," she whispered. I saw a woman beckoning to us on the other side of the table—there was a free chair at her side; she smiled to us and presently she got up and moved noisily to the second row. So we circled the table and sat down in the vacant spaces. 'Best seats in the house,' I wanted to say to Martha—an impulse to outrage that is rather typical of me; but in reality it was a protective mechanism (the grotesque often is), a form of escape: and actually, though I checked myself,

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I felt at once more at ease; as soon as we sat down I felt perfectly safe. I started viewing the room with detachment, conscious and rather pleased, perhaps, with my role of 'observer'.

There were about twenty people in the room. A few men stood against the wall in the back. Along the other walls flickered votive lights of many colours, arranged in architectural heaps. There were candles under the pictures of the saints. Then I became aware that the women at my side were strangely calm, holding rosaries in their laps, though they were not visibly or audibly praying. They were watching Elisa. Not so much spectators as experts, I thought, appraising the show. The Maresciallo stood at the door with his hands behind his back, his head hung forward; exhausted. He was probably much too tired to think or even to feel. And yet . . . I wondered if he, too, were not viewing his wife with a critical eye, & 'king himself, perhaps, if So-and-So, at the death of her child, had not given a better performance . . . or maybe he was pleased with her, maybe he praised her silently as she went along: "Fine, fine, Elisa, that was a good one. . . ." The wails, meanwhile were still about us: "Ah, you loved the American so—and the *Signorina* too—but she did not love you—you were ill for two days—but they did not come to see

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you—and now you are dead! and now you are dead! . . .” I glanced at Martha—to my relief I saw that she did not understand. She seemed in a trance. And maybe I had been in a trance myself, for only then did I notice that she was holding my hand. At last I, too, turned my eyes to the table.

They had clad the child in a long blue suit, much too long for him; in it he appeared deflated. Surely it had been put aside for another day, a day when he would have grown to fit it . . . I noticed that the white forms around his body, which I had thought were flowers, were heaps of candy, the white, almond-shaped sweets that are often seen at weddings. Then, brusquely, I looked at the face—it was there, it was his face, intact; the pallor became him even, I thought. Under his head was an embroidered cushion. It was his face and yet it was not his face, it was an excellent, astonishing imitation; but I don’t think that I believed for an instant the the body on the table was actually Mario. “Your sneakers,” Martha whispered. I looked. Yes, he was wearing my sneakers, the old pair I had given him some time before. There I was suddenly touched—I strained to throw back the rush of emotion, but probably I should not have succeeded if at that very instant there had not come a diversion. An-

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other woman had entered the room. She crossed herself, walked rapidly to the table, kissed the boy's hand, kissed Elisa on both cheeks, then she walked primly around the table and took a seat behind us. I did not know the new woman but I very soon learned from Elisa that her name was Carmellina and that she, too, had lost a child. "But they will play together in Paradise—with the infant Jesus—He loved them so much that He called them to Him . . ."

I don't know how long we stayed. Maybe a half-hour, maybe more. I felt no inclination to leave. At first, it is true, I had been greatly embarrassed by Elisa's act—the puritan in me was strongly repelled by her frenzy—but gradually, as I sat there, I began to seize the *function* of the show; it is, of course, a show, it has nothing to do with so-called 'sincere emotions'—but that is precisely its value: it is unreal, abstract, quite beyond grief and horror and fear—'sincere emotions' are blotted out. One is at first aghast, maybe, but soon one becomes quite settled, calm, deprived of feeling. What feeling there was was discharged on Elisa, she took the burden (other civilisations have professional mourners, which is probably better) but even she, feverish, hoarse, after hours of awful exertion, she was beyond the realisation of grief, beyond exhaustion, even.

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What sustained her, I believe, was merely the desperate will to keep on with the show.

I felt oddly relaxed. I lost all sense of time. I swayed to the tune. And indeed it was almost a shock when Martha pressed my hand, at last, a brusque awakening. "Shall we?" she said. I got up. I went first again. And unexpectedly, for the briefest instant, as I passed the table, I had an absurd temptation: to kiss the boy's hand, as the woman had done—but instead I only touched Elisa's shoulder and quickly walked out. Imagining that Martha was behind me, I ran down the stairs to the street. But she was not behind me. I waited, then I went up again.

Martha was weeping, hunched down on the first two steps. "This is so terrible, this is so terrible," she sobbed. And I, who had not been moved before, completely broke down, I could not control it; never had I felt such a tenderness for Martha, such a need to protect her, to love her. The Maresciallo came out of the house—he found us embraced. And what happened then was so extremely fantastic that from weeping I almost turned to laughter: he consoled us!—tapping us gently on the shoulders: "You must not cry," he said, "we must all be resigned, it is a great displeasure (*un gran dispiacere*) but we must all be resigned to death . . ."

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We went directly home after that. We did not eat.—And now I am suddenly very tired. It is almost four o'clock. I shall sleep a few hours. The funeral is to be at ten. But before I close—one other thing happened tonight which I think I should mention. Martha told me that she was 'unwell'. "You know," she said, "at least now you won't have to worry about *that* any more."

Noon, September 1st

We have just come back from the funeral. Now I only want to jot this down as fast as I can, while the impressions are fresh. There is much to tell; almost too much.

Last night's storm did not clear the air. This morning it was most disagreeable, *scirocco*; heavy, sticky, the sky a glaring white—angry burst of wind and dust. The sea a sickly grey. We went down about nine. Martha in a crumpled black dress, pulled out of her trunk; I in my crumpled grey flannels. I imagine we looked very sad; though actually, as we set out, we felt rather better, compared to last night: the worst was behind us we thought, we hoped.

But something very unnerving happened right at the start. It had been decided that before the

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funeral we should stop at the Fontanas (our former landlords) for a coffee; I don't know why exactly, it was Martha's idea. As far as we knew they were Maresciallo's closest friends, so she had probably planned that we go with them to the funeral. However, when we came to their house, we learned that Camillo had 'gone out fishing' and that the older woman and their little daughter had 'gone to the country'—at home there was only Camillo's wife, dressed in her everyday rags, she was sweeping the kitchen floor. We thought we had made a mistake. "Isn't there the funeral today?" "Oh, yes . . . I guess there will be, this morning." She was not at all friendly, she hardly let us into the house. "But aren't you going to the funeral?" Martha asked. "No, I don't think so . . . I'm too tired. And I would have to change . . ." I think we should have dropped the question right there—but Martha insisted, she became very indignant, told her in detail how 'terrible' it would be for the Maresciallo if she did not go, etc. The woman only smiled. "Yes . . . no, no I don't think I should go, Camillo said so . . ." She played coyly with a pin on her dress—you would have thought that she was being asked to a party. I was extremely annoyed, also embarrassed by Martha: her arguments were obviously not reaching the mark—when suddenly

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the woman changed her mind: "Yes, then I will go—but first I must change," she said. And she drew a curtain across the room.

'We waited. But when she reappeared, about a half-hour later—all the while, of course, we remained without coffee—she was not in mourning, as we had expected, she was attired instead in a most remarkable summer dress, a floral print (obviously the result of a 'package from America') and she had also made up her face; indeed her mouth was so smeared that some of the lipstick had run inside, staining her teeth. She literally took our breath away: never had we seen her decked out in such fashion. It was very upsetting. Moreover she was now in a hurry, she practically shooed us out of the house: "We must get there before they put him in the coffin," she said. (I don't know—this is all not too important, it is also taking up too much space. Maybe she was insane all along an' we did not know it.)

At any rate, she was not disappointed: we got there in time. Only I cannot describe the scene. It is beyond my power. You have seen a certain type of painting: calamitous scenes of despair with figures in contorted postures or running in various directions, imploring for help, tearing their hair, etc.—it was such a scene. Only worse, because of the noise. On the floor was the open

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coffin. Elisa had thrown herself on the table, she clutched the boy's body, apparently she had reached the climax of her frenzy: "Don't take him away! Don't take him away!" she shrieked. Her eyes seemed to come out of her head. Two or three women tried to pull her off, but she held on with all her might. Other people, men and women, ran nonsensically around the table—all of them yelling at the top of their lungs. A mass hysteria by which we, too, were seized. Martha had joined her hands in prayer. "Oscar, I'm scared," she said. I was terrified myself. In all this wilderness only two people were apparently calm. The priest, who quietly mumbled his magic words and then simply walked out, and the Maresciallo, who stood a little to the side, his chin in his hand—the other hand in his pocket—he seemed absorbed in faraway thoughts, quite detached; so that it was a surprise when suddenly his voice boomed out, louder than any of the others: "Now it is enough! Let us start now." At that very instant, that of loudest shrieking, the women succeeded in pulling Elisa away. You would have thought that she was being slaughtered. It was only an instant, but sufficient to whisk the body off the table and place it into the coffin, an operation I did not actually see (I did not go near the body, horrified by the idea

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that it should have started to change) all I saw was a quick, many-handed movement, a concerted *lifting* and *lowering*, and the next moment the table was clear. They brought in the lid. "Not yet! wait!" Elisa screamed. The women pulled her back, held her against the wall: she fought, her shoulder tore through the shirt—"wait!" But they did not wait; in a matter of seconds the coffin was out of the room—and with it the madness. The room was suddenly quiet. The screaming stopped. People filed quickly out.

We did not move, however. We were stunned; it all happened so rapidly. In the room there remained but Elisa and two other women, her sisters, as we found out later; but they were too busy (also silent now, for a moment) to pay any attention to us—and what they did was extremely odd: they gathered the candy from the table and threw it out of the window. We did not move. For we did not understand, not at once, that Elisa's act was officially ended. She was not to come along on the funeral.

When we came out of the room the procession was already on its way, fleeing rapidly towards the tunnel. We had to run to catch up. Ahead walked a little boy with a long, wavering cross. he walked so fast that he was practically trotting; behind him the priest; then the coffin—borne by four

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youths whose 'Catholic Action' emblems I had noticed before; then the Maresciallo, his arm firmly held by a relative, probably, a tall man with a moustache whom I did not know; and finally ourselves, about fifteen people, mostly women, a rather disorderly, fan-shaped crowd. Ragged children escorted us on both sides of the road; they galloped excitedly. Our speed was really amazing, we appeared to be running for cover. And perhaps for good reason, for there were Elisa's screams again, torn, wrung out to the utmost limit. A final flurry. I imagine that she was hanging out the window, though I did not turn. "*Miu-fi-gliu, miu-fi-gliu, miu-fi-gliu . . .*" until we disappeared in the tunnel.

The town seemed more white than usual, on the other side, more naked against the dull sky. There seemed to be snow, in spite of the awful heat. The streets were empty. All the shutters closed at our passing. Far away a bell rang shrilly, rapidly—the sound alternately muffled and very loud, depending on the wind and on the opening between the houses.

But not all the shutters were closed completely, we soon found out: from some there would suddenly appear a mysterious hand with a platter, which, at the opportune moment—presumably the passing of the casket—was emptied over our

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train. This is what the ragged children had been waiting for, we gathered, since the contents of the platters was the same white candy we had marvelled about at the Maresciallo's. It was a free-for-all at each throw, a wild scramble that completely impeded our march. The half-naked devils fought and yelled for the prizes, even picked them off the coffin; some of them so ragged that when they bent down for the candy they remained exposed . . . "Isn't this fantastic? Isn't this fantastic?" Martha said—and it was. The more fantastic, indeed, when one thought that every one of the children had known Mario in life, had played with him, perhaps been his friend. And what made it more odd was that we attempted to gather speed in between the throws, when we would abruptly pile-up to a halt. Any semblance of order was hopelessly lost. And then, almost without wanting to, I found myself betting on the throws: 'that was a poor one', when the spray was wide, or 'that was a good one', when some of the candy would hit the casket.

The Maresciallo was weeping silently. In the midst of the greedy confusion, no longer shielded by Elisa's wails, he was alone and lost, like a child. At each lunatic stop he placed his hand on the lid of the coffin—an inexpressibly gentle, protective touch; and even when we moved he tried

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to keep the contact, tried to reach the casket with his outstretched hand, he stumbled and groped, until the relative pulled him back; then, like a marionette, his head would dangle. There was a silvery sheen of tears on his coat. And then I too tried to think about Mario. I told myself: 'He is in there, dead, inside that coffin.' But it had no meaning. And when I imagined him inside the coffin I saw him already cleaned into a rather wooden skeleton, which the pall-bearers were handling carefully, so that it shouldn't rattle . . .

The procession ended at the cemetery gates. In between there had been a brief stop at the church (no mass) after which we had taken directly the steep path to the seemingly fortified burial ground, on top of the cliff. There was a hasty ceremony here. The coffin was placed on the ground; the priest said a few more prayers and all made the sign of the cross. He said, "And now a *De Profundis* for all our dear dead." The sun came out. It alighted sharply the fairyland tombs—pink, yellow, blue . . . (I thought: so it will be a beautiful day after all.) And the prayer was over. It was all over. The priest made the gesture of gathering his robes; he was in a hurry, he called his choir boy sharply. Then we saw them run down the stairs together. They were gone.

I think that for a moment we felt rather

stranded, though also relieved—as when a teacher is called away from the classroom—a moment of uncertain informality. We crowded around the coffin. Then a woman suggested, “Let’s have another look at him.” This was quickly approved. The lid was lifted; and what I feared so much had indeed occurred. He had started to change. There were dark stains on one of his cheeks. The lips were black and the eyes were slightly open. But worst of all, whitish matter had started to descend from his nose. There was a buzzing in my ears. I was going to be sick. The Maresciallo sobbed, he fell on his knees. He kissed the boy’s face repeatedly. Then he took out his handkerchief and started to clean the boy’s nose . . . I shuddered; but also, quite suddenly, I started to weep. I walked away.

Slowly. I walked among the elaborate monuments, then down a stairway to the ‘lower’ graveyard; that of the poor. Here I saw Mario’s ‘appointed place’, towards the centre of the plot, an open grave, about four feet deep—but I wasn’t interested; I walked on among the weeds and graves, for the most part ill-kept mounds with wooden crosses, to the edge of the terrace. I sat on the wall overlooking the sea.—Yes, it would be a beautiful day, I said to myself. I felt empty, empty. I felt as though I had been at a show,

maybe a complicated pantomime, but one that had not been at all successful. Martha joined me here, about ten minutes later. "They will bury him this afternoon," she said, "it's the custom here to do it later in the day." "Where is he now?" "They put him in a room near the entrance."

Before coming home we stopped again at the Maresciallo's house. Martha insisted on it. "We must do whatever we can to help them," she said, rather too eagerly, I thought. And I wonder, really, if we are not overstepping the limits of 'duty'. Of course she means it sincerely. She wants to help. But . . . but no, I shall not continue this thought now. Another time.

We found that the Maresciallo had not yet returned. The room was dark. There was a faintly leathery smell . . . We hesitated, waiting for our eyes to become accustomed. Then we distinguished Elisa in a corner; she lay on Mario's bed. Near her sat her two sisters. They both got up and brought us chairs—for last night's chairs were still in the room and there was also the table in the centre. On the table was a plate with the remnants of the candy. We sat by the bed. I saw that Elisa was trying to say something—but no sound came out. She had lost her voice. I watched the strain on her face. "She

wants to know if you took any photographs," one of the sisters said. "No, no I didn't!" I hastened to reply. Elisa made a vicious, whistling sound, and I did understand her—she had half raised herself from the bed: "Why not?" she had said. "Why not?" echoed the sisters. For a moment I was utterly lost. "I had no idea . . . I didn't know," I said. Then: "But if you want I can take some this afternoon . . ." And the sisters repeated, "He will take some this afternoon." We were silent for a long time after that. Elisa was looking at me. Her eyes were hard and dry. I looked away. It was extremely awkward. Finally one of the sisters got up; she went to the table and came back with a handful of candy: "*Per ricordo*"—in remembrance—she said to Martha, holding it close to her face. Martha looked at me in alarm: "What shall I do with it?" "Let her pour it into your pocket," I said. Which was done—but one of the candies slipped and started to fall; Martha cried out, then caught it against her dress. I had jumped, too. For a frightful moment I, too, had thought that the *thing* was alive. Our nerves are shot. I think that of all the frights we have had in these days, this was about the worst.

We brought the candy home—but of course we did not know what to do with it. I tried to joke.

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"Maybe we should eat it," I said. And actually tried . . . Then I proposed to throw it away. "But not in the garbage!" Martha said sharply. I laughed. "Why, do you want me to bury it now?" She did not find this funny, however; she turned away. Later I threw it into the sea from the cliff. It made an elegant spray as it fell—tiny white droplets.

Night, September 1st

A lot to tell you again—but I am too exhausted. So I took the pictures . . . One shot of the body inside the casket; another of the nailing of the lid; several of the Maresciallo and of the old grave digger carrying the coffin; then of the awkward process of lowering the coffin into the grave; etc. All this in the ghastly, lonely setting of the empty cemetery, under the beating sun. It was an informal affair. Only five persons were present: the grave digger, the Maresciallo, Martha, myself—and Angelino, one of Mario's friends. I was glad that at least *one* of his friends should have cared to be present. He cried when he saw the body—but not excessively; as a matter of fact, I noticed soon afterward that he was manœuvring cleverly, each time, to get into the frame of my

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photographs; and then he would 'pose' . . . A dark, lively boy, slightly older than Mario.

Before going to the cemetery we had spent another painful half-hour at the Maresciallo's. The sisters were gone. We sat silently by Elisa's bed. The Maresciallo seemed in a daze, he walked from one room to the other. After a while he picked up an alarm clock which he started to wind, dreamily; he walked round and round the room. Martha fanned the flies off Elisa's face. Then Elisa tried to say something again—she pointed to a jar on top of a closet. "Ah!" the Maresciallo said. He brought us the jar. It was half filled with water. Gripped against the glass inside were two horrible dark, wormlike animals. "Blood-suckers!" the Maresciallo explained. They had been meant for Mario, but they were brought too late. Now the Maresciallo would take them back to the pharmacist—"they cost seventy lire apiece," he said.

I left three thousand lire on the table before going out.

September 2nd

The newest development: today we met Camillo Fontana and his wife on the piazza and

they ignored our greeting! Martha claims that they did not see us; but for once I can state that she is not sincere. It cannot be that she has not noticed that *everyone* is behaving strangely. People clear out of our way, or look at us dumbly—conversations stop; mothers call their children from across the street . . .

Of course we had fully expected that our mixing with the Maresciallo in his 'hour of stress' would be amply noticed. (Surely No. 1 on the gossip list.) But what I at least had not counted on was that it should cause such a strange reaction.

Our friend the tobacco lady today: "You were very fond of that boy who died, weren't you?" she smiled. She waited for the other customer to get out of the shop. Then in a rapid whisper: "You know, they are not good people. You must not go to their house, believe me. Nobody gives them credit. And now they will lose their house, for over a year they haven't paid their rent . . ." In a louder tone again, straightening up: "Of course it is a great displeasure, to lose a child like that." This was obviously meant as a piece of good advice, for our 'good'. It was meant very kindly. She will say to her friends: "They are foreigners, *che volete?* They don't know any better . . ."

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Poor Maresciallo! It is a fact that they have very few friends. We are the only visitors. Today we sat dejectedly at Elisa's bedside for about an hour. She was still on Mario's cot, still without voice—or so her silence suggested. Around her neck she had wound a thin grey scarf, rather like a strip, fastened in front with a safety pin. Martha kissed her when we came in—I forgot to tell you that she also did that yesterday, twice. We listened to the Maresciallo's ravings; for there is this curious change in him (perhaps it is simply a return to normal—I don't know)—he seemed delirious; he talked very loudly.

He grabbed my arm: "Did you see," he shouted in my ear, "did you see how the entire town came here to pay it respects? They all came, from the highest to the lowest, the door was open for all." He turned to his wife: "Yes, and they all followed him to the cemetery, the whole population, an imposing homage it was—'ell her!" he said to me, "tell her!" Which was extremely painful. I could not help but remember the handful of people who had actually followed; their hard, excited faces . . . "Yes," I said to Elisa, "it was very impressive."

Then, in the same high tone, he told us about Mario's agony; and it turns out—with alarming clearness—that the doctor was called too late. What he could have done I don't know; but

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presumably he would not have ordered castor oil, a double dose of which seems to have been the only cure that the boy received. The evening before the boy was *burning*, the Maresciallo told us—"He was burning!" and he made the act of burning his fingers. . . . The boy called for water during the night, then at last he stopped—they thought that he had fallen asleep. "But you see," the Maresciallo said brightly, "he was not asleep: he was dying! . . ."

"Ah! but he fought like a lion, yes, *like a lion!*"—he gave us a circular glance, as though he expected a contradiction: "No other boy would have resisted so long, do you hear? For he was not just attacked in one place, he was attacked in *three* places: one, two, and three, the head, the heart, and the stomach"—and he pointed out several times on himself the anatomic location of each 'attack'.

September 3rd

Again today. Really . . . I begin to feel that there is something almost indecent about these daily pilgrimages: what is Martha's purpose? I wonder. And does she really intend to keep it up, as she said she would, "for at least a week"? . . .

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It was very boring. Today the Maresciallo reverted to the favoured fantasy of his imminent power and riches—when he will be elected mayor: “We shall build a beautiful chapel, taller and more beautiful than any of the others . . . then we shall take him out of that poor place where he is now (appropriate grimace at ‘poor’) we shall clean his little bones—‘*le ossiccine*’—and carry them with all the required pomp and ceremony. . . . Maybe the bishop will come for the benediction . . . He will come in a battleship, for you know the bishop always travels in a battleship. . . .” And so on, for about an hour and a half.

What astonishes me more than anything is a certain matter of factness, which even though he is a ‘special case’ is nevertheless revealing of these people’s mentality. For instance, two days ago, when the coffin was opened, we had heard him exclaim, “*Quanto è bello!*”—how beautiful he is!—and in our innocence we had imagined that he was ‘blinded by grief’ . . . But it came out today that he had observed him almost *too objectively*, I should say, and he also explained the ‘why’ of the changes—“It is the heat, you see, a body doesn’t keep in the heat”—and then, with a sudden, triumphant turn: “But he did not smell very much!”

All around, a very trying performance.

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September 6th

Two days ago we went down again; but not yesterday and not today. Martha went down for her shopping this morning; when she came back she said, rather oddly, that she 'did not have time' to pass there. Is she weakening? Maybe. She seems very upset. I am afraid she must have suffered a further snub . . . The mysterious hostility toward us shows, as yet, no sign of decreasing.

Even the Maresciallo's warmth has lessened (it was never too great, at that). I am not at all sure we are welcome. What I *am* sure of, however, is that our visits are perfectly useless.

Elisa is up, anyway—the last time we went there she was cleaning the house. We had brought them gifts: a ham, a large melon, several tins of coffee, sugar, etc. They took the gifts—but *not a word* of thanks.

Incidentally, the photographs did not come out. All blank. There must have been something wrong with the film.

September 7th

I shall mail this tonight. Maybe we shall pass at the Maresciallo's after the boat. Maybe not. Martha did not commit herself.

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The truth is—we are very tired of the whole affair. (As you must be, poor André, after all these pages . . .) And the truth is also—that *they* have become adjusted, better perhaps than ourselves. It only proves again—but was it necessary?—that there is no change, no matter how awful and drastic, which a human being will not accept; to which, if he does not succumb at the very first impact, he will not conform his ancient ways, his everyday habits—as a matter of fact, very quickly.

Which is a rather old story, I fear

OSCAR

P.S.—But it does seem incredible that a whole week has already passed since his death. Actually it is as though it had never happened; so completely was the fact obliterated by the grotesque ceremonial and afterward by the awkward tenseness that remained in its wake.

As though the boy had never existed.

By the way, André, whatever happened to that little poem of mine? Did you send it to *Pen and Penny*?

LETTER NO. 21

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Mrs. Olga Baker in New York*

THREE DAYS LATER

September 10th

Dear Mamma,

Thank you for being so prompt! I received the money almost ten days ago, though I wasn't able to collect it then—they did not have that much cash in the post office. Your welcome message with the money had become 'Ulcome Koma'—they must have thought that it was your signature. Now please be patient for just a *little* while longer. I haven't yet decided on the date. But did you keep the secret?

I also got the letter you wrote before you received the one in which I announced my coming home. Mamma, I *know* I shouldn't get angry now, but still, that was a terrible letter.

How can I feel good about coming home when I find out that that is the way you feel about me. In the first place, I was not *mean* when I answered

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your questionnaire. It is these *suspensions* I cannot stand. Such as about my saying 'we' in the letter. ("You and who else?" you say.) But what sort of question is that? And what has Jenny Picard to do with all this?

. If you want to know, there is nobody with me here. *But what if there were?* What would be wrong with that? I am old enough to decide about such a thing myself—don't you think? And certainly it is none of Jenny's business.

Poor Mamma. I wish I could end on a more cheerful note. You see, the *only* possibility, when I come home, will be to start on a completely new footing. You must take me *as I am*, or otherwise it's just no use.

Well, we'll see. Maybe it won't be as bad as all that. And anyway, it won't be long now: we'll find out soon enough and we'll do the best we can. You will see that nothing 'terrible' has happened to me, except that I'm now a year older.

Many kisses from

Martha

LETTER NO. 22

*From Miss Martha Baker
to Prof. Thomas Purdon at Yale*

NINE DAYS LATER

September 19th

My dear Thomas,

I had meant to write to you all these days. But I couldn't get up enough courage—it seemed so *useless*, each time I tried. Now almost three weeks have passed, and already it is difficult to 'go back' in feeling. You know I became sick. I was so upset by the awful thing.

But I don't know what to tell you about it. Perhaps you want to know how Oscar 'took it'—well, that is what upset me most, I think, the fact that he took it too well. I mean, I found out that he had never really been fond of the boy. What I really mean is that I had expected some sort of change to come out of it, I was set for it—maybe that we should be brought very closely together, suddenly, something like that. Or the opposite. Anyway, a crisis. But it never came. And now

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everything returned to where it was before. We do *nothing at all*, we look at each other, we wait—God knows for what, for the days to go by.

Actually it is much worse than it was before. Oscar is so terribly agitated. And the population seems different, too, the town has changed. There is a kind of closing up for winter. The boats have been brought up on the beaches—the tourists are gone. . . . I was never very fond of the tourists, but still, I felt a very strange pang when the last bunch left, last week. Now the island seems somehow *darker*. Clouds hover and circle about us—sometimes it rains a little, but never much. ‘Hit-and-run clouds’, Oscar calls them—he still has these spurts of humour. But I’m terribly worried about him. That is what I wanted to tell you. He doesn’t look at all well and he has completely given up his work. I’m scared. He has started again to go off on these long walks by himself, the way he used to do when we first came to the island. I know neither where he goes nor whom he sees—I only *imagine* vaguely. He takes a notebook with him. But whom does he try to fool? It makes me sick. And then, when he comes home, he makes a pretence of being nice with me. Often he gives me some silly excuse for his absence, or else he asks *me* why I look so unhappy, if there isn’t anything he can do for *me*. It is all so hope-

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less and foolish. And of course I behave stupidly too, I close up. Instead of at least telling him to *stop* this nonsense. God knows what will happen if we don't.

Well, maybe I should tell you what I really think he feels about Mario's death. He feels cheated by it, he feels that he missed out on him. I'm sorry that this sounds so crude, but how else shall I say it. The other day he told me, in that nonchalant-agitated manner of his, the tone he always used when he talked about the boy: "You know, it turns out that Mario was not quite the little angel we thought he was . . ." And on like that, 'objectively', so he thinks, as though it were something that didn't really concern him, just details of *local colour*. (He makes a big point of despising 'local colour'.) So it further 'turns out' that Mario and his friends made 'dates' with some of the tourists this summer. "And they did it for money!" he told me—I don't know exactly what this was supposed to prove, one way or the other.

Maybe so. Maybe he didn't know about Mario. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that the whole town knows about *him*. That is why they are behaving so strangely. They are actually hostile and at the same time too familiar, they don't respect me. They constantly embarrass me at the shops by asking about my 'husband'—very

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rudely, where is he? where does he go all day?—or they pretend to be concerned, am I not lonesome up there on the hill? and so on. But it is more than that. For instance, the past few days little children have been coming up to me, singsonging something I can't understand. I only know that it is something nasty. They come very close to me, but never *too* close—and suddenly they run away, yelling, hoping perhaps that I run after them. And people look on, they stop to watch—no one objects. And something else. The children never offer to carry my shopping bag any more, the way they used to before.

This apart from the fact that we do nothing here, that there is no reason for us to stay. And Oscar may be in actual danger. I hope not, but one cannot tell with these people. Anyway, we must *obviously* go away. We should take the boat tomorrow, it would be the only sensible thing. But how can I say such a thing to Oscar?

I tried more than once. But I was so clumsy, each time. I said the wrong things completely, he completely misunderstood what I meant. It really boils down to this: He doesn't leave the island because he doesn't want to leave *with me*. Then I must leave alone.

If I could only explain it to him! But I can't. All I do is create 'situations' and make myself

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hateful. Something makes me refuse to talk. How I must bore him! I say exactly the opposite of what I mean. Maybe I'm blocked because I'm afraid that he really won't listen. Or I don't give myself a chance to explain because I'm afraid he'll misunderstand, *thinking* he understands, and so on. It is that way on every level. There is no tie between us, we are together by chance. But *he* is the one who asked me to come here! Isn't that so? Now I've lived with him for over three months, every day, but do you think that I would dare to call him a lover—my lover? in any sense of the word? He would not permit it. If I dare suggest that I love him, and it must be done in the barest whisper, he winces.

I'm repulsive to him. It wasn't so at first, but it is so now. I am tired of pretending that I don't recognise the real situation or, at the times that I do, that I do not care. Now he has invented that he is 'impotent'—that is why he is restless, he says—but can you imagine anything more absurd? It is really the limit. He is so considerate, or so weak, that he prefers to be humiliated rather than admit the truth, that he is no longer attracted to me.

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September 20th

I have decided to leave him. For the hundredth time—but this time I have *really* decided. I have only to go down to the boat. The truth is, I have been ready for almost a week. I missed two boats, but I *will* take the boat tonight. I'm almost happy and I'm so decided now that I wonder what kept me so long.

Many things, actually. You know, I don't think that I ever told you, but at one time it seemed that I was going to have a baby. Before the boy's death—I was two weeks late. Oh, how I prayed, how I hoped for it. For then it would have been easy to leave. Nothing would have mattered then, I would have managed somehow, I would have had the baby. While I have *nothing* now. The only thing that sustains me is that he will be relieved when I go away, but nothing else.

And another difficulty—where will I go? I can't go home, there is no use pretending that I can. You know my family . . . But then where? Of course this is not a real difficulty, the important thing is to go. But still. Poor Thomas, you are probably starting to worry, it has probably come to the point that you are even afraid to open my letters. Which is really sad. But rest assured, I'm not going to ask you for any assistance. I'll never

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even see you again, if you wish. After all, I've worked before in my life, and I can do it again. Something will surely turn up. And if it doesn't, then there is always another way out, you know what I mean, and I'm not being dramatic. Nobody would miss me much, I don't think . . .

But seriously, the only thing I worry about now is Oscar. How will he react? You know, there is another thing I never told you, or maybe I did, that he is not very well. Often he cries in my arms at night—and now just to think of it makes me weaken. Because I actually enjoy these moments, when I can cuddle him like a baby. How I love him! And it is all I had to hang on to during all these weeks. I don't know why he cries. For me it is enough to know that he isn't happy.

And again I have this doubt. Whether I should really leave him. Whether I am even *able* to do it. What if he were in danger? What if I were away when something happened?

But these are just excuses. I *must* leave. I must, I must, I must!

September 21st

So I didn't leave, after all. This time it is really finished. For I'll never have the courage again.

I stayed in my room all the while. I heard the

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hoot of the boat. I told myself "it is too late." I didn't move. Then I heard the noise of the anchor being raised. Now it was really too late—and still I was astonished when afterward I went on the terrace and saw that the boat was actually gone . . .

Oscar came home and everything was just as usual, he was even nicer than usual. He didn't suspect a thing, that is what makes it so strange. And what is also strange is that I feel hugely relieved. It's how I am.

This morning there was another horrible scene at the market, the nastiest yet. I was asked again about my 'husband', only this time I pretended that I didn't hear. I was outside the fruit store, picking out apples from one of the baskets—all these stores overflow into the street—there were many people around me and in the confusion it was easy to ignore the question. But the woman insisted. "What's the matter?" she said, very rudely, "Why don't you answer?" I kept very still. I looked at the apples. Then somebody answered—I think it was a man, I didn't look around. Nor did I understand what he said. But *everyone* laughed. Even the fruit lady, with her outstretched hand, she could hardly catch her breath. "*Non se la prenda,*" she finally said. "Don't take it too hard."

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But I did take it hard. I had a kind of fit—I dropped the apples. Then I turned to the crowd and I said an *awful* word—which made them laugh even louder. I started to cry.

It is a wonder, really, that the scene did not kill me—it probably would have, before. But now I don't care any more. I have given up. It's up to Oscar, let him decide.

My good and patient Thomas, what a bore I must be with these foolish stories. I'm not worth your bother, I'm a hopeless case . . . And I won't write to you any more, after this. I have no right to impose on you any longer.

Still, I kiss you sweetly, now, as sweetly as ever.
Thomas.

Remember me, anyway.

Martha

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MacCloy in Venice*

TWELVE DAYS LATER

October 3rd

My dear André,

I received Number 7 of *Pen and Penny* containing my little poem; and containing also, of course, your ingenious and erudite essay, very fine, very much to the point: by far the best piece in this otherwise . . . rather too 'summerly' issue.

André, I must report a very strange news to you: Martha has left me. About eight or ten days ago, suddenly, without any warning; one afternoon I came home from a walk and she was gone. The house was in perfect order almost too clean, in fact, too neat: I had instantly the sensation that it was a *definite* absence, that she had not just gone off on a walk. There was a note on the table. 'Dear Oscar, when you read this letter I will be gone. Please don't try to prevent it . . . '—and I did not read any further, I was terror-

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stricken. You see, I thought it meant something else . . .

I ran to the cliff near our house. I was perfectly stark, perfectly conscious, too: and never in my life have I felt so *alone*, as during those seconds, as I lay on the rock, looking down. And it is strange, don't you think, that in a moment of such *stupefying* stress I should have still been conscious. And even distracted . . . For, as I looked down, I found occasion to wonder about the waves, very curious, even from above, as they slowly, calmly spread foaming sheets over the shallow rocks. I was conscious of the irregular ground under my body, of the pebbles near my face, of the tuft of yellow grass I clenched in my fist as I drew to the edge . . .

Then I ran down the stairs to the beach. I almost fell on the rapid, irregular steps, roughly cut out of the rock—and it was so dangerous, my almost falling, and I was so agitated, that I started to cry, from sheer horror—at the same time telling myself it didn't matter, that I might as well fall . . . I started to call her: Martha! Martha!—but my voice was so weak, and dry, it had no effect against the enormous, indifferent landscape. I searched along the beach, frantically—stupidly: I looked into caves . . . I was insane, by this time. (One fantastic detail: in my despair I affected a

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limp!) I waded through the water, in my shoes and trousers, till I was under our house, at every instant expecting to see her body.

At last I was convinced that I would not find her here. But I was not reassured. I ran up the stairs, blinded, panting, utterly out of my senses. Only when I was in the house again, only then did I abruptly notice that her trunk was gone. And at that very same instant, perhaps, I heard the boat: a long, mournful blast of its whistle.

"There is still time," I said to myself. I grabbed the note from the table and I was running again, this time towards town. There would have been time, indeed!—if something absurd and completely fortuitous had not occurred: there was suddenly a pain in my side, a sharp point under my ribs; it stopped me short, beyond any power and will I could muster—I tried to go on, I thought I was dying, so sharp was the pain, so great my exhaustion, my frustration. So ridiculous, too. For it is clear to me that she had not *wanted* to leave; she had intended, she had hoped, on the contrary, that I *prevent* her departure—so very much like a suicide, really, when one considers what a suicide in most cases is: a final attempt to summon help, a last and desperate call. "Save me!" is what the dying man cries, "prevent it! don't let me do it!"

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And then, when I was able to run again, it was really too late. There was the second blast, it meant that the boat had started to move. I was on the pier. It had just started, that moment, to churn its propellers, and already it advanced securely, strongly, almost at once surprisingly fast. I ran to the far end of the mole, near where it would pass.

I saw her. I waved. She stood alone at the railing, a straight, motionless figure—I recognised her coat. Then I called her, I waved frantically with both my arms—and there can be no doubt whatever that she saw me, too. But she did not respond.

Ah, Martha. How bitter it is that she did not respond. How true to type. Long, long I stood on the edge of the stones and waved. Then I sat down. I opened my fist and slowly uncreased the crumpled sheet. I read her note. (And I read it many times since. I probably know it by heart.)

Dear Oscar, when you read this letter I will be gone. Please don't try to prevent it, don't try to find me, don't write to me. It is best this way.

Believe me, even if you are upset at first, you will think that you are upset, but you will be

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really *relieved*. Poor Oscar, how you must have suffered with all my scenes and stupid behaviour. But that's all finished now. It's because I loved you so much. But I was clumsy, I only interfered with your work and you didn't *need* me.

Don't think about me any more. Think about other things, about your work. You should go away somewhere by yourself, where you can finish your novel. Then you won't feel so badly any more about this summer, about all the disturbance I caused because I did not understand you.

Peppino just came for my bags, I had it all arranged with him without your knowing. Dear Oscar, now we must say good-bye. I will be strong, I promise you, Oscar, I know you are concerned for me, because you are so sweet. Darling, darling Oscar. And you must promise me not to worry. Martha.

André, you will not understand me—that after the first rush of pain, helpless, bitter pain, what I felt was *rage*. Suddenly the meaning of her act emerged; and it was so dreadfully unnecessary, what she had done, so brutal, so cruel, a childish and at the same time monstrous prank, a senseless insult. That is what I felt—that I had been

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wronged and humiliated, and even, that deep inside she had not been sincere, that her note was not sincere . . . Ah, these are not 'proper' thoughts, I know; but how could I be noble then? *She* had sailed off with the noble role! . . . I felt abandoned and robbed. And was it necessary, I asked myself, if she felt that she had to do it, which she didn't (I never tired of telling myself that she didn't) was it necessary to do it in just such a vindictive and public manner? For you can well imagine that her departure did not pass unobserved . . . When at last I rose, long after the boat had vanished—it was getting dark—I noticed that I was not alone. Groups, that I could not at once distinguish (children, beggars) had slowly advanced on the pier, in creeping, catlike motion. They made room for me. I walked stiffly, looking straight ahead (pompously, I am sure) my steps resounding on the huge, flat stones, then through the streets of the town . . . People looked at me as I passed; they stood frozen—motionless groups—in passionately curious, unfriendly silence.

Since then I have hardly moved from my room. I was too ashamed. Not because of the people, I don't care about them; they would not be more foreign to me if I were in Tibet; and if I cared, I would leave. *But why don't I leave?* That is

the question. Because I am weary, I am mortally weary, I have broken down—every time I breathe too hard I'm afraid I'll weep . . . for my failure: I mean, as a human being. Now, as far as I look back, I see only failure; humanly I have always failed, I was always short, in spite of my effort, or because of it, from the very start, from day to day, from lie to lie—always dancing, one step ahead of collapse, year after year . . . And so it goes on, even now, even now: '*Don't try to find me, don't write to me . . .*' Wasn't it easy to agree to that? God, I *am* ashamed, I am ashamed of this letter—and I delight in my shame! Surely I had been sinking for a very long time; but this has made me suddenly drop in a spin. And so she succeeded: I have been finally '*faced with the facts*'.

The result is this, that I have let myself go. You would not believe the degradation into which I have fallen, André, in just a few days. I have ceased to shave; I have hardly washed; the bed is unmade. Angelino comes every morning to clean the house, supposedly; but his ideas on the matter are vague, particularly when it comes to sweeping the floor. The storms—the long-awaited storms—have come, and they seem to have raked through the house, there is a cyclonic disorder, partly because I have had to move my belongings

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from the other room; the other room leaks . . . All week long it rained.

When Angelino comes in the morning he is often drenched to the skin. Then he builds a fire and dries his clothes on a curious scaffolding of his own invention, which makes the room look even more crazy, like an encampment on stage . . . He is in complete control, and as a servant he is very poor, I fear; but then he is lively and gay, I am grateful to have him. Yesterday was his fifteenth birthday, which he calls his sixteenth, because it started his sixteenth year . . . A laughing monkey, dark and nimble, rather out of proportion, his jaw, his hands, his feet are too large, but pleasantly so, he has an engaging appearance; and moreover he likes to come here. Already it has become a habit. I miss him when he is late, I am tense, and then my heart-quickens when I suddenly hear his step on the outside stairway: "*Permesso*," he says, opening the door, without knocking.

So the days go by. I work very little. I try to read. We live in semidarkness, most of the time; there being no panes in the windows, we must close the shutters. We listen to the howling gale. The hours pass. Angelino sits in a corner, reading the comic books he brings from town every morning (I give him the money for that). He is

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docile, gentle, he never disturbs me. I teach him chess. Often he speaks about Mario—he and Mario were very close friends—but the Mario of these stories is very different from the one I knew: he tells me that together they engaged in burglaries! . . . I wonder if the Maresciallo ever knew about that; and about other exploits, such as the two of them going to spy on a group of lady tourists who had the habit, each morning, of bathing naked at one of the more hidden beaches. (Needless to say, I have never seen the Maresciallo again.)

Ah, André, all this must sound very strange. Does it frighten you? Of course it cannot go on much longer, one of these days I will leave. "The next boat," I say each time.

But it is hard to move, it is hard to break. I would need an awakening shot. And what also keeps me in this lethargic state is that the misunderstanding with M. tha continues. You see, I had fully expected that she would write. (Of course, why don't I write myself? etc.) But this morning, when the boat arrived, I was convinced that there would be something—at least a card; I rejoiced in advance. I waited for Angelino on the terrace, and when I saw him, saw him wave an envelope, far away, I felt a rush of real joy, a rising swirl . . . But nothing, nothing, when

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even *one* word would have meant so much. She does not know it, but she has no compassion. (The 'mail' was only the *Pen & Penny*; small consolation, really.)

Well. How shall I conclude. I don't know: maybe you could come down to Rome and I would meet you there. Or is that asking too much?

OSCAR

LETTER NO. 24

*From Mr. Oscar Tower
to Mr. Andrew MaCloy in Venice*

THE SAME DAY

October 3rd

My dear André,

Earlier today I sent you another letter. But you will probably miss it—as I shall send this from the mainland, *espresso*; I am down at the boat; my luggage is already on board.

Less than two hours ago I received a telegram from the Embassy in Rome—it was brought to me by the boy I had sent to mail the letter—‘Your presence urgently requested here in reference death of Miss Martha Baker stop acknowledge receipt Henderson.’

Now, André, I want to ask you to come to Rome. *Please come at once.* You will receive this tomorrow morning; tomorrow night you could be in Rome. (Hotel Inghilterra.) It doesn’t matter at all if you don’t receive the other letter; in it I reported that Martha had suddenly left

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me, about ten days ago, and then I gave some complacent details about my supposed 'dejected state of mind'—it is these details that I would much rather you didn't read; if you did, it would only increase my distress, which is enough as it is.

God knows what awaits me tonight in Rome. Probably I should report at once to Mr. Henderson. But who is Mr. Henderson? And in what capacity shall I answer his questions?

Where did they put her? At the morgue? Ah!

But now there is no emotion left in me, except fear. I gasp for air.

I come back to this page. I have been watching the preparations of the boat. People joking, laughing, apparently without a worry in the world. Now I am in the first-class lounge; I had to flee from the crowd on the pier. They were there for me, of course, suddenly very friendly, waving, grinning to me; they knew that something was up: I had received a cable and because of it I was leaving. They tested me, they sent greeting to Martha: "*Saluti tanto la Signorina, eh?*" I nodded. And so I went below deck, to the familiar interior warmth of steamboats; a hot-paint smell; the mysterious noise of pipes beaten somewhere . . .

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While I packed I found several objects of Martha's: a shirt, bobby pins, a number of 'lists' in her handwriting. Things of 'no importance', discarded. I also found a photograph—it had slipped behind a box—one that I took when we first came to the island. I have it now in my hand—it is dirty, one corner is creased—but how gay she looks, how bright, unsuspecting, completely happy.

This happiness I slowly muffled, day after day, until it was crushed. I was afraid of it. It was all right for her to be cheerful, for us both to be cheerful together—but not too much, there was a threshold at which I would stop, pull out suddenly—for I didn't want her to get 'ideas' . . . I didn't want to be caught off guard. Having once decided that she had designs on me, I was always on the lookout, determined not to give her a chance' . . . And then I was *dissatisfied*, most of all, at it not having turned out as expected. For, as you know, there was more to it than just my 'standing off', in regards to Martha. I was ill: I longed for sympathy, not for 'passionate love'; and I am not ironical now, for there was something truly unhinged in my conduct this summer, an illness of spirit, which, incidentally, I had completely foreseen, *against which*, indeed, I had brought Martha here (it was one of the

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reasons)—as a protection . . . But she rebelled. And I was astonished, so great had been my convenient confidence that she would be resigned . . . And always there will be that question: how much did she really know? how much did she guess? (My dear Andrié, I hope you understand what I am talking about, and that you will not be tempted, ever, to ask for degrading details.)

She rebelled. And it is pathetically beside the point to say now that she managed it badly, that she, too, did not give me a chance. For she *was* aggressive, in all her innocence; there was a joyous instinct to grab which unbalanced me, I was rushed into the defensive. I would tell myself: There has been a wrong start, wait a moment! And then I tried desperately to set it right; I compromised. But why did I fight? why did I not give it up when there was time to do it. I wonder. Because my vanity was at stake; I did not accept defeat. But also because I loved her—you will not believe it, but I really did, as much and as weakly as I am able to love. And so I delayed; I gave in halfway; I sacrificed on minor matters. It was a constant strategic retreat. But none of the points I *accepted* brought us ever any closer, in fact they set us further apart. There were increasing 'zones of silence', subjects which were never mentioned. (For instance, any

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reference to my past was banned.) But no, I am fooling myself. It was not love that made me yield, it was weakness. Only weakness, weakness. And this she perceived . . .

André, I cannot face it. The minutes pass. Soon the boat will leave.

Maybe it will be a question of identifying the body. There will be officials, policemen. People for whom she was nothing. Forms to be filled. A dead body. But when I think of her voice! of her warmth, of her laughter. Simply of how alive she was. Actually, I would not be surprised if they put me in jail tonight. Nor would I resist.

And, of course, I am thinking constantly about the boy; how horrible he looked in death, the gruesome details I observed 'objectively' . . . But Martha. Poor Martha, all alone . . .

André, this doesn't help. I must attempt to be sober. Before I do anything tonight, as soon as I arrive, I will try to call you.

OSCAR

PS—There is a delay. The boat will not leave for another two hours! It is the height of irony. This foolish, pompous, elusive boat, but so *official*, so secure of its rights; we shall have been its slaves to the end. Now I'll miss my connection for

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Rome—I shan't get there before three or four in the morning.

And there is nothing I can do about it. Why is the boat delayed? Nobody knows, nobody cares, nobody hurries. Nobody is interested in my problems. I had the weakness to tell an officer how important it was for me that we should leave on time, but he only looked very bored, he nodded, he didn't even deign to answer . . . And after all, what difference *does* it make? My rage is wasted.

I may as well try to sleep.